



Boomerangs

and Square Pegs

A novel
by K.H. McMurray

Boomerangs and Square Pegs

A K.H. McMurray publication



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BOOKS, STORIES, OPINIONS

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This book is a work of fiction. While certain incidents are taken randomly from personal accounts and historical records, the names, characters, places, and, for the greater part, situations, are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental

To Pearl Kirby (1965-2020).

Prologue

She will leave me.

It's six AM. Breakfast for one. Eggs, sunny-side-up, like the morning outside; two-cheese English muffin, melting in the toaster oven; already humid outside; coffee will be a little bitter today, no matter how much sweetener gets put in it. The OJ will stay in the fridge – my stomach can do without the citric acid bombardment this morning.

She will pack her things and leave me.

Coffee brews. Radio station plays then breaks from classical music, telling me what's already evident about the weather.

She will complain that she cannot get along with me.

Eggs pop and sizzle as the news comes on. Maybe a new conflict in the Middle East – what else is new? Right now, how people can't get along is not for me to comment on. Waiting for the usual news bit where the US president issues an ultimatum to some nation or another at a press conference. The Cold War has been over for a few years, but they're always looking for a new enemy. Will they ever know true peace? The cheese on my English muffins, already dark-brown-verging-on-black, will burn my fingers or my tongue.

She will moan about how difficult it is to know me. She will swear that she has known me for five years and yet has trouble understanding me. She will say she is confounded. My response: Nothing in life is simple. If it were, we could live without using our brains, as some people actually do.

The newscaster speaks of tobacco ad bans, multi-million dollar lawsuits, and cries from sport and art events organizers about how they'll die without funding from ciggie companies. Looking out upon the city, just waking up now, from my balcony, it's difficult to try and put this news into context. The message conveyed on the radio is understood, but its impact is lost on me. Perhaps such news no longer moves me.

She says she will return later to get her furniture – what there is of it. She may or may not see me here at that time.

A loud gurgling sound tells me the coffee machine is almost done making my morning brew. It makes less coffee than usual. Liquid stimulation in the morning is good, but two's too much for me. The news anchor predicts there'll be a new national newspaper within a few years. My copy of the Globe & Mail is lying on my balcony table. Is there really room for another paper on my small Made-in-Canada patio table?

She will walk out the door without even saying goodbye. This won't surprise me, but it will be regrettable. In another month, we would have celebrated our second anniversary as a couple. We lived together for less than one of those years.

The city wakes up in fits and little jerks; goes sluggishly. Sleep is more my style: It's been an all-nighter for me. Troubled or preoccupied? Not sure. But sleep was not my friend. Coffee beckons me all the same, as does breakfast, out onto the balcony – my morning paper awaits. The radio station has now resumed its normal morning classical music.

A breeze (oh yes, there is a god) comes, and with it arrives the scent of mums and a bare trace of cologne – CK, I think. All this reminds me of how good it still is to be alive. Earlier this morning, it was in this same spot that something came over me, like what it would be like to throw myself off the balcony. It was just a passing thought. Such stupidity, suicide. Such a simple solution to whatever ails you; so simple; and so stupid. Something for stupid people to do because they're unable to think of what else is out there. Life's out there. Life. So my life's immediate surroundings feel like the blast area of an A-bomb: good memories seem vaporized; bad memories burned into my brain. My life goes on. Way too tired right now to contemplate life, the universe, and everyone else.

The woman next door is out on her balcony – this may explain the CK fragrance – and is startled to see me, as if she were the only person to be awake at this hour. She small-talks to me but she can tell that this isn't the best time for chit-chat, so she too leaves me. Too bad. Nice fragrance.

A pigeon lands on my porch-railing. My movement is statue-like, my breathing subtle, with no desire to scare off my new guest. We make eye contact – is its life really any easier than mine? Pigeons are known to take dumps on practically everything. It's so simple. If you don't like this car here, PLOP! That statue there? Ah, sweet relief! How about that kid who tried to bean you with a rock? Pilot to bombardier, pilot to bombardier. It would be a little obscene if a human tried that, especially when you consider that humans can't naturally fly. Image: an old street person, after being dissed by some three-piecer, dropping his drawers and flapping his arms in a desperate attempt to get airborne over this yup and dive-bomb him. Sleep, oh wherefore art thou?

The pigeon flies off – unloading along the way, natch. Back to my newspaper. Each article is like something for me to download into my memory. News desensitizes me these days; it's all information, told whichever way a reporter sees it, and filtered through some editrix who conscientiously keeps in mind the politics of the paper's ENC and publisher. Once you know all this, it's not difficult to separate the husk from the corn and get to what's essential – just info, and nothing else.

She will be back, but she will not see me here. Although my love for her, oddly enough, still exists, her leaving me doesn't phase me. Perhaps it is for the best — for both of us.

It is 6:30AM, and it has been over six hours since she left me. The time for reflection on what we had, on what we could've had had things been different, has come and gone.

Today will be a sick day for me. My motorcycle will also be idle: No riding it today.

The sunrise is marvellous, brilliant, and warm, even in muggy weather. The city is spread out before me. Ten storeys down, on the street below, traffic picks up; people go about their lives as usual. Somewhere, out there, is someone else for me, maybe beyond these city boundaries. And one day, my life will return to something usual.

Maybe.

But when? No one knows.

My life has been tied into hers so intrinsically; her habits mine; her likes & dislikes, too. My life subsumed into hers. Nobody's fault but mine. But now, before figuring out where my life will go from here, there's one nagging question that needs answering:

Who am I?

Aidan

One

Aidan had a small hope that things were still on between him and Malvena. He had to know for sure. He had to see her in person. A phone call wouldn't do. Maybe she'd sidelined him due to something having come up, something bad happening, in her life.

"Girlfriend in a coma? Sure. She always liked The Smiths. No, bad joke. I hope she's all right", thought Aidan.

He carefully put away some letters he'd received from BC. There were photos with those letters. He intended to look at them again later; he had no wish to mix them up.

Life post-university in Guelph was all about getting some more work experience. Now the end was near. He wanted to set the record straight with Malvena: On or no? Another person would occupy his apartment soon enough. He'd already taken care of some of his heavier items by selling them to other students, including the incoming tenant. His old bed found a new owner just after his TV did, so Aidan was limited to a camping mat, a sleeping bag, and a pillow.

"Not the most comfortable in the world, but I'll manage. "Twill serve."

He'd sent off what university textbooks remained after sales but kept one on animal husbandry – *"Strange that anyone still uses that expression"* – in addition to a few novels. He also had his journal. And clothes: Aidan wanted to travel light, not naked. He wanted his car to get him all the way back to BC, so neither he nor it could be weighed down.

Before setting out for either Malvena's or the West Coast, Aidan had to see to other things, like getting his car tuned up.

"To the West Coast?" asked Mike the mechanic, after checking Aidan's car over, making some adjustments, and replacing the odd nut and bolt. "Mike" wasn't his real name, but people had been calling him that for so long that it stuck and he couldn't be bothered to correct anyone. "You'd be lucky if you made it the Rockies in this thing!" Aidan figured Mike would say something like that: The car was third-hand and probably due for some parts yard soon.

Mike only charged for parts. Servicing was gratis; likewise for topping up Aidan's gas tank. Aidan had been a client of Mike's for six years now, since his first year in undergrad. Mike had been in this business for too many years to count. He always believed in good customer relations. He liked Aidan from the first moment. Aidan figured these freebies were a parting gift up until Mike told him otherwise. Mike was almost to retiring and so decided to sell his business to a major chain but without first checking the fine print. "No long term benefits, so screw'em", said Mike. Aidan wondered how much of this business would find its way into Mike's home garage.

Back in his apartment, now mostly vacant, a blinking light: Aidan's answering machine. He listened to the message. It was his second cousin, Maura. His shoulders slumped. Journal out, he retrieved and unfolded his family tree before him. Crease-worn and probably soon needing tape or else rewriting on fresh paper, it showed his name and those of his immediate family (including a nephew and a niece), of aunts and uncles both near and great, of cousins both close and distant, of in-laws, of grandparents maternal and paternal, and of their lines going back as far as he had information. To the information of one of his great-mothers, Maggie, Aidan wrote:

"d. 28 August 1994, in Weir, Saskatchewan, age 103 years and two months"

This was Aidan's branch of the McGregor family, and its matriarch had just died.

"103 years old. That's a pretty long haul. From Maura's message, all her faculties intact, too. Impressive. Then again, Maggie always has been impressive. Had been. She remembered the dates of everything: births, baptisms, engagements, marriages, deaths, burials. She forgot neither name nor face nor anecdote nor history."

Aidan was one of three great-grandchildren who'd kept a detailed family tree, and they usually made a point of staying in touch with each other. Another of them, Aidan's cousin Wendy, committed Maggie's stories to memory and was okay with names and faces but not with dates and ages. The third, Maura, was good with anecdotes and dates but not so great with everything else. Aidan remembered every other detail, writing it all down, except when it came to staying in touch with Wendy.

"Gotta do something about that soon".

There were times when he wondered why he bothered keeping a family tree. It seemed like he kept records for people who, in recent years, couldn't be bothered. At least doing so was easier on the McGregor side. It was less easy on his mom's side, especially where his maternal grandmother was concerned: He'd have to learn Cantonese and then go to Hong Kong just to start a search. Perhaps he'd do this one day. Perhaps never.

"Maggie thought it was important, and we all think Maggie's important, so it's become important to all of us. That must be it."

Aidan perused his family tree a little longer and then carefully folded and tucked it into his journal. He had no need to test its fragility.

"Well, how do I put this, Aidan?" said Malvena. "School was fun, but school's over now, and so are we. You just weren't in my after-grad plans. I'm sorry you had to drive down here just to learn that. I thought it was pretty obvious that it was over between us."

"Well, you did say you'd contact me later", said Aidan, shrugging his shoulders.

"I know I said that, but I didn't mean that", she said seriously. She looked down, turning to her right, as if to see something behind her.

He bunched his lips together, looked off to the side, and wondered how she could live with herself lying to anyone like that. He didn't like the idea of anyone communicating that way. He considered it mere consideration to have informed him beforehand. He would've done the same for her. All this left a bad taste in his mouth. He looked at her and smiled. "Right. Well, I guess it's good-bye for real."

"If it makes you feel any better, we could stay in touch."

He thought about it for a second. "No, that's okay. I think I'd prefer to limit the game-playing to Scrabble and Milles Bournes."

"Game...?"

"Have a nice life," said Aidan, waving as he turned and walked back to his car. He barely avoided the motorcycle parked in the driveway. He hadn't really noticed it upon arrival.

"Must be new."

Aidan started thinking that he should've contacted Malvena earlier, perhaps clarifying things right away. He conceded that she'd had a point: Perhaps no communication made it obvious; perhaps he just didn't want to accept that. Yet, a part of him still felt that this was some silly game she'd played with him. He was disappointed – in who he couldn't say. What he could say was that he had impressed himself, particularly in how he handled those last moments around her, keeping his wits about him and not resorting to acting the child. He knew by the time he left the GTA that he'd be insufferably pleased with himself. He figured it better that he was alone in his car.

The motorcycle in the driveway came into his active thoughts again.

"She's never liked those", thought Aidan, suspiciously.

He decided not to give this any further thought. Whatever had just happened with Malvena was merely ceremonial: He was over her.

Back in his apartment, he took out certain letters and looked at the photos within. He smiled but cautiously. He was happy to be going back to BC. He had much to look forward to there. Although there were certain things he wasn't too keen on seeing again, he knew he could weather these minuses so long as there were more pluses. He stored these letters, again carefully, and then pulled out another soon to be sent off: his response, to the most recent letter he'd received, prepared in advance just in case things went south with Malvena. He hoped the recipient hadn't given up on him.

"We'll see", he thought, skimming the letter for content and scrutinizing one last time the photo of him within. *"Could be better. Carpe Diem."* He sealed things up, stamped and addressed, all ready to go. *"Roll the dice."*

He'd kept Maura's message around and listened to it one more time. He'd had a few more questions for Maggie, now to go unasked. Maura had asked him to pick up someone in North Dakota while driving to Weir. He certainly had to call her if he wanted to know who it was and where exactly. NoDak was a big state.

Two

"Car packed. Apartment all spic-n-span. Keys to landlord. Ready to motor", thought Aidan. *"Bye, Guelph. It's been a treat-and-a-half."*

Aidan was Chicago-bound. His friend Peter had been on Aidan's case for a while about visiting. Aidan decided that going south of Lakes Michigan and Superior would make for quicker road travel. Plus he had to STFU Peter at some point.

"No time like the present."

Travel through southern Ontario went flash-like. The line-up for customs at Windsor was a bear – *"Then again, when isn't it?"* thought Aidan. He'd crossed here once before for a concert in Detroit. The concert, he loved; the city, not so much. Crossing now, US Customs decided to inspect Aidan's car but appeared disappointed when they found nothing suspicious. Leaving Detroit, Aidan took off as fast as Michigan state speed limits allowed him, stopping for lunch in Durand near a stately railway station. Railways had always interested him. His grandfather had worked for one, and Aidan was born in a BC town that had sprung up along another.

Lakeside Indiana gave Aidan the shivers: docks, warehouses, railway bridges in up-position, and piles of used rails and ties, plus the odd ship; all rusting, rotting, decaying.

"Armageddon has arrived and not a word of it in the news", thought Aidan, hoping someone would clean all that up soon. He then looked beyond that to the Chicago skyline. Somewhere beneath that skyline lived Peter, who was going to show Aidan the Chi-town he loved so well.

Peter's children, Marie-Soleil and Gordon, were in Montreal with their mother, so their sturdy bunkbeds were available. Aidan chose the top bunk, despite his long-time fear of top bunks falling through frames. The next morning, the bedframe was still intact, though Aidan's right fourth toe not so much: He'd driven its nail in jumping down and landing incorrectly. Nothing was broken, though it did hurt when he wiggled it.

"It'll heal. I'll live."

Aidan noticed two photos, one of a boy, the other a girl. The boy seemed rather ordinary to Aidan, but he thought the girl had a noticeably mischievous glint in her eyes, making her small smile suspicious. He laughed at this thought.

"I see you've met my kids." It was Peter. "Or at least photographs of them." Peter looked down at Aidan's foot. "Would you like some ice with your coffee?"

The EI took Peter and Aidan to the Museum of Science and Industry. Aidan liked the view of Chicago from the EI and was surprised to learn that it was the only elevated railway still in operation in a North American downtown core. Upon arriving, Aidan looked up, intrigued, and noticed steel rails on wooden ties. The EI clanked along on its merry way. Skytrain back in Vancouver didn't look anything like this.

Outside the museum was a streamlined shovel-nosed locomotive. Peter told him it powered one of the first mainline diesel passenger trains way back to the 1930s. Aidan wondered what the heck it was doing outside. He was curious about its interior. He bought a one-use camera at the gift shop and decided for later he was going to save two shots for this somewhat forlorn, weather-worn engine. Inside the museum, full of planes, trains, and other forms of transportation, he felt like a kid again.

The Big Downtown Peter showed Aidan later on was a to-see, and Aidan loved it: the vibe, the food, the drink, the music, the people it attracted; the model transit train – a mini-EI – that went round and round the restaurant all along on sideboards up near the ceiling. The blues band playing grill-sizzled steak-like. A young woman from Japan asked Aidan if he was Japanese. A New Yorker piped

up, saying why no he's not from Japan and can't you see. Aidan felt this to be a bit too blunt for his liking and hoped she didn't feel put out by all this. By that point, Aidan figured he'd ignored Peter. Aidan looked over at him after lord knows how many drinks, and Peter seemed to be doing all right, chatting up someone who was staying at the local youth hostel. Aidan began to wonder if Peter missed his ex-wife as much as he'd previously let on. Aidan also began to wonder whether he would be able to visit here once back in BC. Chicago was so close to everything eastern and central. To everything western, not so much.

"Future road trip, maybe?"

Aidan put away so much alcohol that evening that he no longer felt his toe aching. He hoped it could stay that way for at least the next three weeks.

The next day, the Museum of American Broadcasting beckoned. They laughed over images of Bozo the Clown and marvelled at a recording of the first televised presidential debate. The radio version of the Jack Benny Show had sunk in, too. On the road trip the next day, Aidan and Peter took turns being Jack Benny or Frank Nelson.

"Yeeeeeeesssss?" "I always run into you." "Ooooh, that must hurt." "Now cut that out!"

Three

Peter needed to see "a friend" in Minneapolis.

"Must've struck out from the night before", thought Aidan. He figured on seeing the sights but staying only one night there before heading out again. He wanted to make Weir by supper time and had to factor in lunch en-route, picking up a cousin in Bismarck, North Dakota, and going through customs back into Canada. As with Chicago, he had to leave quite early.

Aidan and his second cousin, Marcus, talked about family, Maggie, and school. Marcus was in his first year in agriculture at a state college and was seven years younger than Aidan, but when it came to university, whatever age gap there was didn't really come into play. They talked about this novelty called "e-mail" and the Pine System, only available at institutes of higher learning and some libraries. Marcus got his first e-mail address recently but Aidan had gotten his three years earlier, so Marcus considered Aidan "a veteran". Marcus mentioned that his college had warned its students that e-mail was for "research purposes only".

"Yeah, we all laughed at that, too", quipped Aidan. "But just a word of warning: Don't get too much into newsgroups or IRC, or you'll wonder where the last 24 hours went."

"What's 'IRC'?"

" 'Internet Relay Chat'. It'll be the end of us all", joked Aidan.

Line-ups at Portal/North Portal were nowhere near the length nor hassle of those at Windsor/Detroit.

"That could change one day", said Marcus, as they went north-westerly along Highway 39. At some point farther on, Aidan even noticed an international freight train running in parallel and figured he could outrace it.

"No use", said Marcus. "They're all under slow orders in these parts."

"Why's that?" asked Aidan. "That train doesn't look all that long or heavy."

"Piss-poor track-n-ties. Shitty roadbed. Deferred maintenance. Take yer pick. The train can't go any more than 50km/h. Our speed limit is 100. Try and match their speed. You'll piss off everyone behind us. Course, you could drive on the shoulder and let the others pass. That's legal here."

"I'm sure it is," said Aidan, "but it might be good if we made Weir before supper gets completely cold. I don't know about you, but I'm hungry."

"When didja eat last?"

"Breakfast. Minneapolis."

"No lunch?"

"I forgot."

"We should be there in about an hour."

"I'm trying not to think about supper. The last time I was there, it was a huge feast. Food comas all around."

"Stop, man. You're getting me all hungry now."

Turning off the road onto the family farm's driveway, Aidan's car finally blew out. It had been making odd noises starting a few miles back, but Aidan figured it was gas-related.

"A quarter tank. Definitely wasn't running low on gas", thought Aidan, thinking the obvious.

They got out and pushed. The driveway was flat and straight but luckily enough only about a quarter-click long. But that was it for the car: almost four years of reliability. R.I.P. Mister Ray. Aidan thought it a mystery that it ran as far and as much as it did.

"Mike was wrong: It didn't make it to the Rockies."

On the front porch of the house, watching them huffing-n-puffing, pushing the car along, parking it in a safe place, stood a dark-haired young woman in her early 20s, wearing a kitchen apron, arms folded, smiling.

"I was going to give you guys some work when you arrived, but I think you've made your quota", she said.

"Fun-nee!", said Marcus, sarcastically.

"Yeah", said Aidan. "Part of your chores and responsibilities now?"

"Nope, but nobody's doing it anymore, so it may as well be me", she said.

She and Aidan hugged. "It's good to see you again, Maura", he said.

"You, too", said Maura. "Aside from your car crapping out in the driveway, how did your road trip go?"

"As well as could be expected", said Aidan, "except this guy here. He's trouble all 'round."

"Heh! I was the perfect passenger", said Marcus, sarcastically, lighting a cigarette.

"Well, I figure you two must be hungry by now", said Maura.

"Aidan's famished", said Marcus, lit cigarette up-and-downing on his lips. "I had to stop him from eating the car upholstery."

"Pretty close", said Aidan.

"Well, supper's waiting for both of you. You'll find it more nutritious than a car seat. You can get settled in after you eat. Hey!" said Maura, pointing to Marcus, "Ciggie out before coming in."

"Killjoy", said Marcus, playfully complying.

Lots of people, most of whom Aidan recognized, but some, no, were seated at the dining room's big table. There were three empty chairs, one each for Maura, Aidan, and Marcus.

There was an empty chair at the head of the table. No one else was to sit there. It was Maggie's place at the table, all done up and properly laid out though foodless. To Aidan, it felt both strange and solemn to see this: an empty chair at the table, an empty place in the family. Chairs could easily be filled anew. Someone in the family? Irreplaceable.

Everyone at the table, Aidan included, to one degree or another, felt loss. One other feeling everyone at the table shared was hunger. Aidan took his place at the table before his stomach got the urge to converse with someone. Conversation at the table got underway, with people swapping stories and anecdotes and telling jokes. Aidan didn't hear any oneupmanship among them: just telling, listening, laughing, which Aidan loved and felt comfortable with. Things weren't quite like this in his immediate family, whose conversations always seemed either too polite or contentious, with one person trying to out-do another over something quite minor. Aidan never felt terribly at home in such an environment. He wondered if perhaps he'd been swapped with another baby in his family just after birth.

A toast was raised in Maggie's honour – *"Probably the first of many"*, thought Aidan. Memorial services were days away. This supper was only a portion of this branch of the McGregors. Relatives from BC, Ontario, and other parts of the Prairies had yet to arrive – same for friends and past workers from the farm.

Aidan espied an RV right outside in the backyard. He imagined there'd be more rolling accommodations in the coming days – not enough room in the house for everyone, and town was a ways away.

"Like with Maggie's one-hundredth birthday. Lots of people then. Maggie knew how to draw a crowd."

After supper, Aidan had intended to get his gear from his car but instead turned and walked out to the main road. The setting sun warmed his face as he looked at the old telephone polls sticking up like sentinels of communication. He imagined each one as a past generation of his family, their stories transmitting along the humming wires, the signal of each losing something with distance, the sight getting dimmer with time. He imagined their names, dates, and stories, and the possibility of a storm cutting them from family memory.

"Like in my branch."

Back at his car, Aidan started removing his effects. They'd arranged for him to work on the family farm for a while. He didn't have to pitch a tent in the back yard. He got the guest room in the house's newer section, added on when Maura's parents, Frank and Bennie, came to live there after Maggie's husband passed away. Before that, Frank and Bennie had been living and trying to get by in Moose Jaw and were thinking of moving to Calgary before this opportunity came up. All they had to do was look after the farm. Frank didn't know a great lot about farming – his father had been a business owner in town – but Bennie had often helped out on the farm, though she had to re-learn some things as well as teach her husband. Fortunately, there were already hired hands to help them along, so Maura could also learn how things worked on a farm. Maura's brother Liam opted to go work for the government.

Each time Aidan visited this place, he could imagine himself living here, taking care of business, raising a family. He'd imagined such a lifestyle since his high-school days. Back then, he thought he'd had the perfect girlfriend to do this with. She, however, had other plans that didn't involve staying where they'd gone to high-school. After losing her, he thought his dreams were all wrong.

"Then again, if you have a dream, how can it be wrong for you? It can only be wrong or inconvenient for someone else."

Aidan thought about this ex-girlfriend, about how she was doing, where she could be now. It was the first time in a long while that he'd thought about her at all, for any reason. He suddenly felt apprehensive.

"Maybe I'll just keep my mind on work. What's in the here and now is more important."

Four

The only funeral home in town hadn't seen so many people in it in quite a while. Maggie's service drew them a-plenty. Aidan recognized a number of them. Those he didn't were introduced to him by those he did. Many knew him by reputation, and they were happy to meet someone from William's branch, content that someone had bothered to stay in touch with Maggie. Aidan corrected them, saying his cousin Wendy also stayed in touch. Wendy's name didn't ring any bells.

Aidan looked around for any familiar faces from his branch. Wendy, he figured, wasn't able to come out from BC. He'd called her once before leaving Guelph and once after arriving in Weir. Both times he was only able to leave a message. He knew she wasn't coming.

Over in the corner stood a couple, looking rather formal and stiff, backs too near the wall, looking like they were holding it up. He went and stood with them, his back also to the wall, to the side of the man, looking out on the crowd. Conversation was short, with lots of smiles, seemingly all for appearances. No eye contact; just talking in asides. On occasion, Aidan could make out via peripheral vision the woman looking at him. His tolerance for politesse exhausted, he decided to circulate.

"That was a strange-looking convo, Aidan", said Marcus, some minutes on. "I've heard of talking to the walls but not stiff boards."

"I'm practising ventriloquism", quipped Aidan. "Seriously though, those were my parents."

Marcus looked in the direction of Aidan's parents. "So, which one did you get your smarts from?"

"Half him, half my mom. She's", said Aidan, indicating the woman, "my step-mom."

"What happened to your real mom?"

"Died when I was six."

"Bummer. I guess that's bringing down the mood, eh?"

"It's a memorial service, so why not?" Aidan smiled.

"Any more of your family here?"

"Not that I can see."

"Might be a good thing."

Marcus was outside having a puff. Maura always warned him to quit while he still had two good lungs. He figured, being young, that everything was going to be all right and that he'd quit one day. Even then, he once quipped that if one lung gave out then he'd still have the other one to use.

The wake at the McGregor house drew slightly fewer people than the service. John and Julia decided not to be there – sightseeing beckoned them. Marcus never got a chance to practice talking to stiff boards.

He looked out onto the driveway, now lined with cars, trucks, vans, the parking line spilling out onto the road, going in both directions.

"Quite a crowd you've drawn here today, Maggie."

He took another haul on his cigarette.

Another car got in the parking line, several lengths from the entrance. Hearing the zip-grind of a parking brake lever being pulled up, followed by door-opening creak and then a metallic slam-shut – *"Older model"*, thought Marcus – he could see a bobbing head making for the driveway. The bobbing head walked toward the house, changing focus with every footfall. Marcus noticed a look on the man's face as he came into view somewhere between half-certainty and consternation. The man stopped at a certain point, his eyes darting bird-like, looking at the whole house in front of him, like he was trying to memorize all detail but couldn't, becoming frustrated – same for the nearby buildings and then to what surrounding fields he could see.

Marcus smiled a little, cigarette dangling a little from his mouth, a few puffs away from only a filter. He regarded the stranger curiously.

The stranger looked up suddenly and said, "What're ya looking at?"

Marcus took the cigarette between his two fingertips but continued smiling before saying, "Well, I'm fine. And how about you?"

The stranger gave Marcus a slightly angry look. "This where I find McGregors?"

Marcus went serious for a moment. "You here for Maggie's wake?"

"That my grandpa's mom?"

Marcus nodded at the stranger knowingly. "I guess."

"It's all right, Marcus." It was Aidan. "That's my cousin, Richard."

Richard's face developed a sadistic little smile upon recognizing Aidan. "Hey, squirt! Long time, no see."

"Not long enough", thought Aidan.

"So you're a big shot animal doctor now? I s'pose you think you're too good for the rest of us?"

Aidan just stared at Richard, trying to guess from what fresh hell his problem came.

"Y'know", said Marcus, attempting humour, "if you're gonna make trouble, we'll have to ask you to make it somewhere else."

"I didn't drive all the way here from Fernie just to be turned away", said Richard, not seeing any humour in Marcus' statement. "My ol' man insisted I come out here."

"Why?" asked Aidan, now concerned. "How's Uncle Jim?"

"Why the hell would you care?"

Maura came out for fresh air and looked at Richard curiously. At some point, she realized what his problem was and told everyone to let things drop. She grabbed Aidan and whispered something in his ear. Aidan nodded. Maura took Richard inside, telling him everything was going to be all right.

By this point, having flicked the butt away and then lit another cigarette, Marcus looked at Aidan and signalled a non-verbal 'what?'.

"She said her ex-fiancé was like that sometimes."

"And?"

"Nothing more than that."

Marcus thought about it for a few seconds and then shook his head. "Ah, hell. Poor clucker."

"Yeah. Something's not quite right with him."

"You turned out fine."

"What can I say? I'm the black sheep of the family."

"Heh heh. So that's his problem with you?"

"Oh, he's been a dipshit since we were kids. He's always had something to prove. Got worse when his sister and brother died in a car accident. And then he went and joined the army."

"Which CFB's he at?"

"AFB. He's a doo-lee. His ma's an American. He upped and joined theirs instead. Thought he'd still be doing his tour. Didn't think he was going to show up here. Not at all. I figured it would've been my uncle who showed up."

"Hmm, disappointments abound."

Liam came out at that point. He looked back to make sure no one else heard him. "That guy Maura brought in? My weird-o-meter's gone into the red."

"Go easy", said Aidan. "As long as he doesn't have an episode, we'll all be fine." He turned to Liam. "Your sister's a saint."

Liam smiled.

Marcus, smiling, puffed his cigarette, exhaled, and looked at Aidan curiously.

"Wanna know something?" asked Richard, sitting next to Aidan near a fire pit out back.

"Sure", lied Aidan, figuring on humouring Richard while Richard wasn't acting the obnoxious macho.

"My dad's an asshole."

Aidan stifled a smile but gave Richard an attentive look.

Richard looked at Aidan and then looked down but back up at him again quickly, his eyes never in one place for more than two seconds.

"Thanks for sharing", said Aidan. "Why tell me this here and now?"

"No reason." Richard looked down. He looked away. "Just felt like it."

Aidan nodded and then took a swig of his beer.

"It's like, when Meg and Tom died, dad needed me to be the kids he lost, but on steroids. So I gave him what he wanted."

Aidan figured this wasn't the end of Richard's sentence.

"Still wasn't good enough. At least your dad's not like that."

Aidan shook his head a little. "He is, just not in the same way. I'm afraid nothing I ever do is good enough for him."

Richard looked at Aidan, puzzled. "For real?"

Aidan scoffed. "Yeah, for real."

"How do you deal?"

"I don't. I just work on myself, like I was brought up to, and that's difficult enough without me giving a fuck what anyone thinks of me."

"Kinda disrespectful, don't ya think?"

"Respect's a two-way street: Give and take simultaneously. Give and wait doesn't work. Besides, we're adults now. We were brought up to set our own terms."

Richard nodded. "Yeah."

Aidan thought his Uncle Jim had always been a little rough with his own kids but didn't think of him quite like Richard did. He had no idea how poorly Uncle Jim had treated Richard after losing Meg and Tom until Richard mentioned it. Aidan often thought his branch of the family was dysfunctional, just not like that.

Fire crackle and pop. Warmth. He stared at the flames. He thought once more of how life in Saskatchewan might suit him, despite the cold winters. He stopped in his mental tracks: Like with Chicago, he was perhaps romanticizing things a bit too much.

Out of the corner of his right eye, he noticed Richard slumping, slowly drifting to the ground. Others around the fire who'd avoided Richard for most of the wake looked at him curiously. Nobody had bothered to ask him while he was awake if he'd brought a tent or a sleeping bag or even if he'd intended to sleep in his car. Maura came out with an old pillow and blanket, just in case the overnight temperature got too low for Richard. Aidan was pretty sure that Richard was going to wake up in the

middle of the night, not at all happy, wondering where the heck he was and how he came to sleep in someone's back yard in the middle of southern Saskatchewan.

Seeing John and Julia again, as well as talking to Richard, gave Aidan less taste than before to return to his home province.

Maura sat down where Richard had once sat before he settled on taking another sort of dirt-nap.

"Quieting down inside?" Aidan asked.

"Pretty much. Almost everyone's gone to their RVs or trailers or what've you", said Maura. They looked at the fire for a little while. "I never got the chance to tell you: That was a nice speech you gave at the service."

"Thanks. And thanks for letting me speak. Truth? I wasn't sure what to say."

"Who is? You get one chance to say something thoughtful while everyone's there. There's pressure in that, I think."

Aidan nodded in agreement. "I had some practice at uni speaking in front of people, so at least I wasn't nervous. But what to say...?"

"You said what you had to. It came from the heart, and it worked. Besides, there's no point in over-thinking what's already happened."

"I'd've liked it if my dad agreed with that."

She smiled in disbelief. "He didn't?"

"Yeah. No. Not sure. He said, 'You didn't say enough about the family'."

"Well, it was supposed to be about Maggie. Kinda silly of him."

"I know!"

"Did his lairdship make much ado about anything else?"

Aidan laughed. "That sounds like a Maggie quip."

"Well, maybe I inherited her sense of humour", Maura said, smiling.

"Not a bad thing at all", said Aidan. "Yeah, him. He thought I was a little too sentimental."

"Did he tell you that during that little conversation I saw you having with him earlier?"

"Oh, you saw that? Yeah. Same. Told him he should've written the speech himself."

"End of story."

"Not quite. I told him I'd see him in two months. Then that was it."

Maura looked at Aidan up and down, concerned. "Do you really want to go back there?"

"Yes & no. No: I have a life away from there, or I had. Yes: I've always dreamt of making something of myself there. No: Two or three relations there aside, I'm not wild about my family as is", Aidan said, pointing a thumb toward Richard. "Yes: My close family is there."

Maura nodded and smiled. "In a lot of ways, I think we here have become your close family."

Aidan looked at Maura and smiled. "Perhaps 'close' isn't the right word for them. 'Immediate' then. But you're right: I do feel close to all of you here. You've all made me feel welcome since Day One."

"I remember that day, too. You came expecting to visit Maggie, and instead, you met a whole bunch of us."

"All at once, too. It was my deer-in-the-headlights moment."

"You did look a little overwhelmed. Confused, too. I think it took you three tries before you stopped calling me 'Maureen'. Not that it's a bad name, mind."

"But it's not yours. I know. And I agree: Both names are nice. I don't know what got into me calling you that. Really. I've only ever met one Maureen in my life, and you don't look a thing like her."

Maura looked at Aidan curiously. "Another family member?"

"Nope. Just someone I once knew. You'd like her. A real in-charge type."

Maura laughed. "I suppose that's me. So, your life? After here? What will it be?"

Aidan shrugged his shoulders. "Not sure. I've got my degree, so that end's taken care of. Will I work for someone or open my own practice and where? Haven't decided. Whatever the future brings, I guess."

"Whatever the future brings?" asked Maura. "Don't we make our own future?"

Aidan shrugged his shoulders again. "I used to believe that. Not sure anymore. I think it's 50-50. You know how you set out to buy a car, a certain car, and you think, 'Ah, that's the perfect one for me'?"

"Mm-hm."

"Then, alluva sudden, you see another car along the way?"

"Yeh."

"One you never knew existed? And you find out that it's better than the one you originally wanted?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that's life. Make a plan and follow it, sure, but maybe something better comes up along the way."

Maura nodded a bit and then smiled. "I guess that's one way of looking at it. Grandpa Shaw – dad's dad – used to say that some things just weren't meant to be, but you move on. You adjust. You have to."

"That's life. Sometimes you're in the driver's seat..."

"...and sometimes on a roller coaster."

"And sometimes you're on a biffy rolling down an icy slope: Too dangerous to stay on and too dangerous to jump."

"Sometimes. And sometimes, you're sitting in front of a campfire with people close to you", said Maura, smiling.

Aidan smiled pleasantly. Since they first met, Aidan felt that he and Maura had grown up and gone to school together. He always thought it curious, the similarities between distant relations.

Maura felt like Aidan was an older brother. She wondered sometimes whether Aidan could be contented in life. She saw in Aidan someone who wanted to settle down with someone who felt like he did but he just wasn't sure where.

Aidan shivered from a passing breeze. The campfire had been keeping him warm enough up til that point, but it was starting to fade, its warmth perhaps no longer sufficient against the dropping temps of a prairie evening turning to night. He looked up to the clear sky and remembered what his grandpa had told him when he was younger: that every star in the sky was someone who'd died and gone away, of someone looking out for the living. Aidan knew this wasn't true, but he still liked the metaphor of it. He realized that, for whatever ups and downs he'd had in life, Aidan could've had it far worse. He remembered a few people from high-school who had been kicked out or even disowned by their parents, his cousin Wendy being one of them; others whose parents had physically and/or psychologically abused them, hammering home that those kids would never amount to anything and were completely worthless; and others still who expected cradle-to-grave jobs but went to the unemployment office, from proud to broken and nearly broke. He knew that they were worse off than he was.

But he also recalled hope springing from misfortune, while in his third year of undergrad. A fellow student, physically active and into swimming, playing basketball, running, and many other things besides, had an accident that robbed him of the use of his legs. Aidan didn't see him again until the middle of fourth year. This person had become wheelchair-bound. He also seemed in very good spirits. He told Aidan about how he was going to start doing para-athletic activities and explained with much enthusiasm to Aidan what kind of activities there were. Several people had shaken their heads feeling that this person was deluded. What they didn't know was that he believed in himself and believed in the possible. Aidan believed him, too. Aidan even half-joked that this person could one day be an Olympic athlete. Others told Aidan that it was insensitive for him to get anyone's hopes up like that. Aidan told his colleague what they'd said. This colleague just laughed and said that anything was possible. His optimism rubbed off on Aidan for good. Even what had happened between him and Malvena hadn't really changed this.

All told, Aidan knew that there were even worse problems one could face in life, but Aidan managed to avoid all of those. Even his health was good. He figured that life was never supposed to be problem-free. He figured that whatever constituted his romantic life was going to sort itself out within the next six months. In the meantime, he had another two months of work ahead of him here, and he always felt that diving into work was a good way to forget about life's annoyances. He'd have to deal with those annoyances later on, but at least he'd do so with a clear head.

He hoped the heavy clothes he'd brought with him from Guelph were enough in the event of low temps. Maura assured him when he arrived that they had work clothes in case his weren't enough.

Aidan felt well-taken care of here and decided not to fret about things. He wondered whether there'd be any more campfires like this before it got cold.

He also wondered if his parents had left after the service. He hadn't seen them at the wake nor had he seen anything that resembled the type of vehicle they normally drove. At the funeral parlour, he hadn't seen a trailer hitched to any car. So whatever they drove, from what Aidan could figure, they hadn't intended to do late-season camping.

"They probably stayed at the best hotel in town", thought Aidan. "Their lives, their choices."

Five

"Ugh. Bus. I've done this long-distance too many times to count", thought Aidan. "Never again... after this."

Since Mister Ray had croaked a while back, Aidan had no choice but to take the bus back to BC, though this time only from Moose Jaw, only a little over a day from Vancouver, routing through Calgary, where passengers normally changed buses. Aidan tended not to sleep well on buses unless exhaustion came calling, usually after 24 hours, and closed his eyelids.

Prior to leaving, he'd shipped another box of his things off to his sister's place. While he'd had the car, that stuff was in the trunk. Travelling by bus would've meant another two bags for him to lug around. He figured he'd arrive before the box did, knowing the postal service.

Seeing John and Julia again reminded Aidan of certain things about life in BC that he wasn't partial to, although John made the optimistic statement that things had changed a lot there, making Aidan temper his thoughts on this subject.

His campfire conversation with Maura some weeks back had reminded him of some of the good things he'd once had in BC. There were places he wanted to revisit, places he looked forward to seeing again.

He took out the photos once more. He smiled. This letter had only recently arrived. Maura wasn't surprised that Aidan got mail at the farm: Aidan had had the decency to tell her in advance that he might receive one or two things in the mail. Not that Maura minded, so long as Aidan's letters weren't ticking.

He thought about the time since Maggie's service and how working into harvesting season served to help clear his head of some things. He'd felt bad for Richard and the state he was in. Richard had been Richard but Aidan decided to bear it, not wanting to worsen the situation. He knew Richard was compensating for a lack of something and figured there wasn't much one could do to change the man of his behaviours. Richard's current condition seemed to only compound his attitude problems. As long as he and Richard stayed on opposite sides of BC, Aidan figured, then everything ought to be all right. The morning after that campfire, Maura had gone out to where Richard was supposed to have been – she'd wanted him to stay awhile and eat a proper breakfast – but noticed only a camping pillow and blanket. She'd never had the opportunity to serve him breakfast: He'd left without notice. Aidan determined that, like Richard, he needed to move on from this.

Aidan thought once more about his distant relations and how he had good times around them. He had to wonder whether his familial problems while growing up in BC would've happened anyway had he grown up in Saskatchewan.

"Anything's possible".

He didn't question things further. He liked his distant relations and was quite happy to have been in contact with them down through the years.

He wondered why he was so critical of his immediate family. It seemed like whatever he wanted in a family was rarely present in his. He thought of his family overall: the distant relations, far away from where he'd grown up, but close to him in many ways; the irony of his immediate family being quite distant to him. He realized that he wasn't the only one: Many in his branch couldn't bother to be around each other after a certain age, unlike the other branches. He couldn't even recall when exactly his branch had last congregated for Christmas dinner at William's. With only a few exceptions, people in Aidan's branch of the family had become as distant from one another as they had from other branches.

After changing buses in Calgary, Aidan got into an intense discussion with a German tourist, already annoyed at it taking so long to cross the Prairies, over who was a better classical music composer: Schumann or Schubert. Aidan fancied Schubert but the German tourist felt differently and tried to convince Aidan that Schumann was musically without peer. Aidan eventually conceded and said he'd listen to Schumann with new ears. More than anything else, it was a concession to get his seat-mate either to talk about something else or to shut up entirely.

What seemed like an eternity later, the bus pulled into Canmore, Alberta. William left Weir after a dispute with Aidan's great-grandparents and ended up working in a coal mine near Canmore, only to be furloughed within a year. Deciding he didn't want to sit around on no pay, he and a few others boxcarred it toward the west coast, hearing about coal mining on Vancouver Island, figuring to try their luck there. He'd only made it as far as Vancouver but still wanted to go Comox Valley, one steamship and train away. He did make it down to Pier B-C, took one look at the CPR Princess ships docked there, decided he'd already had enough of coal dust, and tried his hand at working on the docks. One day, he noticed the CPR was hiring. He worked the night boat service for a while, one day meeting his future wife, whose father owned land out in the Lower Fraser Valley. He saw her later onshore, travelling alone, and carried her bags to the taxi. Later, he sent her a telegram asking, "Will ya?", and she answered, "You betcha". They married within a year, and before he knew it, William was working as an interurban driver on the BCER. His work took him past farmlands and through towns. He was never far from home, unless a motor broke down. Even after passenger service shut down in 1950, he still travelled around as a track inspector. From this, Aidan's immediate family started in Hatzquiam, once in the heart of a farm belt but now encroached upon by Vancouver's ever-expanding suburban sphere.

Aidan wondered if things were really better and simpler in his grandfather's day. Work seemed easier to come by and didn't require a university degree. Then again, human and civil rights were quite different then. In fact, there were laws that prohibited specific groups of people, like that of his maternal grandmother, from having rights.

"No, now is better. Not perfect, but better. We still have a ways to go for perfect."

Sometime later, the bus pulled into Banff. Aidan had been there 12 years earlier for a festival of youth orchestras. Somewhere, in a box at his parents' place, was the trumpet he played then. He figured he might take it up again one day. In addition to youth orchestra, he also played trumpet in both junior and senior high school concert bands. He also sang in school choir. John had moved the family back to Hatzquiam before Aidan started Grade 10, so it meant a change in schools. Prior to this, Aidan was in Bayline where he was born, and where John had set up a legal practice after being admitted to the bar.

John once recommended that Aidan become a lawyer. Aidan was good with legal matters and could dope out legalese with ease, but he felt the lawyer's life wasn't for him. In fact, Aidan hadn't been entirely sure what he wanted to do with his working life post-high-school. He liked animals, and after working on a farm and at a pet store, he decided on vet science. John and Julia were not pleased, but that was all history.

"They probably shouldn't've offered to pay for my tuition, but then why say that, even without conditions?"

Spending 10 days in Banff had given him a wider perspective on things. Meeting other musicians from all across Canada had given him an idea of how vast and varied there could be in the same country. When he changed schools at 15, he decided to get involved in his high school's annual musical productions, in the first year as a set designer turned musician when someone bowed out of the orchestra due to mono, in the next year as a musician in the orchestra, and in his final year as a singer/actor in a lead role. Exciting times. Despite that, Aidan wasn't sure he wanted to go into music as a career choice. He'd probably have to move around, go study in some far-away university, and play in another city's orchestra, probably living there for a good chunk of his life, although later this wouldn't have bothered Aidan: He'd lived in Guelph for six years and had borne it well.

Some ways on, he passed the cut-off that would normally take the bus, if it were going that way, to the Okanagan Valley city of Kelowna, south of which lived his cousin Wendy. Aidan wondered how she was doing. He hadn't called her since before he'd left Guelph. She had gotten pregnant in high school,

brought her kid to term, got kicked out and disowned by her parents, and got married later on to someone from the Okanagan who'd been in Vancouver studying at the time. Aidan had attended their wedding, but aside from himself and his sister Melanie, there weren't any other McGregor descendants present – it was considered a no-go for many family members. Aidan had once considered taking up this issue with her parents about how they could bring a life into this world only to abandon it but then had thought better of it. Aidan decided this discussion would happen. One day.

He pulled out the latest letter he'd received from BC and looked at a photo. He smiled.

Six

John was there to meet Aidan when the bus finally pulled into Hatzquiam. Supper at a fast-food restaurant seemed fine to a famished Aidan. It was the first time in a while that Aidan had seen John. Aidan had never had a chance to say *Bon voyage* after Maggie's service. Aidan got the impression that John and Julia's presence there was more a courtesy than anything else. What little they'd bothered to learn about Maggie was through Aidan himself. Then, John seemed more concerned about not saying anything he'd have to account for later, so publicly-speaking, he was a little stiff to be around. At this fast-food place, John seemed a little less pre-occupied.

"So how was your bus trip?" asked John.

"Tiring, as usual", answered Aidan, "but there's an advantage in taking the bus."

"Being tired?"

"Letting someone else do the driving. I get to enjoy all the scenery that way. In any case, it's not a good idea to be tired and driving at the same time."

"Did you ever consider buying another used car?"

"Don't start. I had a good run with that car. I was lucky to get better than parts-and-scrap value for it, and I think that was only because the buyer was a friend of Liam's."

"Liam?"

"Yeah. Liam Shaw. Cousin? You met him at Maggie's service. Works for the Saskatchewan government?"

"Ah, yes. Him. I remember."

Aidan ate his meal.

"Bullshit you remember."

It was true. John never forgot a face, but names were another matter. Sometimes, in his law practice, he had to have someone remind him of whoever's name. All this was on the side, of course: He had a reputation to protect.

"Sometimes it's good to know people", said Aidan. "Who knows when they can help you out?"

"Sometimes, it's better to do things on your own and not be such a burden on other people."

"Do you intend to change the vacuum tubes on your radio? 'Cause it's still playing that annoying old tune. But you did say many things've changed around here."

"Yes, many things."

"But not everything", said Aidan, staring directly into his dad's eyes.

John's attitude about self-sufficiency grated on Aidan's nerves. It was one thing for John to preach it while his kids were growing up, but Aidan felt that John had forgotten to turn off the taps after a certain point. Something else that irked Aidan was John's continual yet not-quite-stated opinion that Aidan should be a lawyer, and this despite Aidan having already earned his degree in something else. But it really bothered him that time hadn't changed things in this respect. It was as if they'd started a board-game long ago, and while there was no resolution to it, they were obliged to continue looking at it, with the accumulated dust irritating Aidan.

"Well", said John, trying to be diplomatic, "I guess we can't agree on everything, right? So, what are your job prospects now?"

"First, I'd like to relax for the next few days before doing anything. It's been a busy year. I need to catch my breath."

"Busy? I'm surprised to hear you say that. Didn't you go down to Acapulco last spring break?"

"John, I've never been to Acapulco."

"Oh?"

"You're thinking of Mel. And I've never gone anywhere for spring break."

"Never?"

"No, never."

"Well, what happened after you graduated?" John asked, deflecting.

"I worked in Guelph til the end of August. Not exactly a vacation, working."

"And Saskatchewan?" he asked, running out of options.

"Work. Again. As in getting-dirt-under-my-nails kind of work, and not the paper-cuts-and-exploding-pens variety."

That last comment was an intended cut-down. It was hypocritical of John to want Aidan to become a lawyer, never mind what Aidan really wanted to do in life, and at the same time not to really care that Melanie wanted to follow in John's footsteps. She was in her last year of law at U Vic, but John had been picking that apart from the beginning: she didn't go to an older university; she took a year off after high school before going to law school; he wasn't sure that Melanie should be a lawyer in the first place. That last point pissed Aidan off to no end. John defended equality under the law but couldn't seem to apply that same attitude to his family, and in marrying Julia, he'd found a kindred spirit with the same inconsistent attitude. He remembered having had a lot of arguments with them, and not a little grief either, just to apply to vet school in Guelph. Melanie overheard a lot of those arguments, and while she got it worse from them, and this closer to home, she was more mentally prepared for it. Carolan, the middle child, known as "Caro" to everyone, decided to avoid these problems altogether and became a receptionist at John's legal firm. At least she had no problem remembering names.

"In any case", continued Aidan, "I haven't had a break in over a year. A few days of relaxing isn't the end of the world. Of course, if you're uncomfortable with that..."

"What?"

"...I could help clean up around the house."

"Are you implying something?"

"Implying? No. But do you still keep stuff in your fridge beyond the expiry date?"

"Mm..."

"Or, how about forgetting to close boxes in the pantry? Leaves around the yard? A driveway that could do with a sweep? Arranging stuff in the garage? Cleaning out the beer & wine fridge? You do still have a beer & wine fridge, right?"

John was flabbergasted by Aidan's rapid-fire questioning but quickly regained his composure. "Okay. Sure. If you want to help, that would be acceptable. When will you be at Carolan's?"

"Next week. She's agreed to put me up for the next few months until I get on my feet again. I just have to help with the housework and babysit her kids on occasion. In the meantime, I can plot my next course of action."

"I think she'll need the help. She's expecting any day now."

"Kid #3. That's how this family of ours works. Never two without three, right?"

"Right." John had this look on his face of someone who'd never really given this subject much thought and probably wouldn't in the foreseeable future. Family numbers concerned him way less than the numbers in his bank account.

It wasn't a heavy rain that started while they were inside the restaurant, but it was constant. They dashed for the car. Aidan said, once inside, "I imagine Julia isn't home from work yet?"

"You imagine...?"

"Well, sometimes she works late, right? Plus, you just ate your meal like you hadn't had supper yet, meaning you didn't eat at home. If she's there, she cooks. If you get home first and she doesn't work late, then you cook. If she works late, then you fend for yourself. How am I doing so far?"

"You know, you could have been a good lawyer", said John, ruefully.

"Isn't that old saw getting a bit rusty by now?" Aidan asked, smiling.

Starting the car, John could manage only a smile.

John suggested a tour around town, just to show Aidan that some things had changed. Aidan pointed out that it was too dark and miserable outside to see anything but suggested they do this another day, preferably in daylight.

Once back at John's place, Aidan thanked John for supper and then said he'd shower and hit the hay.

"Sure", said John. "You know where everything is. We haven't changed anything since your last visit. Oh, just one thing: We may be gone when you wake up. I'll get you the spare keys so you can come and go as you please."

John was half-right about things around the house. He'd had the main bathroom renovated since Aidan's last visit, but everything was pretty much in the same place, and the plumbing functioned as normal. Aidan took his shower in comfort, knowing that the water main wouldn't burst at any moment.

Aidan's old room hadn't changed at all. It was as he'd left it when he came back for Wendy's wedding three years earlier. John wasn't too pleased about Aidan going to Wendy's wedding, but more likely he wasn't pleased with not being invited.

"He wasn't invited because he joined his idiot brother-in-law in saying that Wendy was no longer a part of his family."

If that weren't complicated enough, John also got miffed at Aidan because Aidan disappeared up into the Okanagan for a few days and hadn't bothered to say why. Aidan knew he'd get nothing but grief if he'd told John that he was going to visit Wendy or why he'd been there, so he never bothered in the first place.

"Why catch hell twice?"

The shower was a welcome wash-off of the day's bus trip. Compared to a bus seat, Aidan's bed felt like he was floating. In a drawer next to his bed, he searched for something old but familiar: a cassette tape of piano tunes, composed, played, and compiled by a friend from high school, Satie-esque but more in the minor than in the major, largely improvised, minimalist, repetitive. This music, simple relative to life in general, always relaxed Aidan, helping him put the day's events in perspective. He needed this for a good night's sleep.

Music filtered through bulky, still-functioning-like-new headphones. Aidan thought about his time in Saskatchewan and how much he liked staying with his family there. Six years studying in Ontario hadn't really changed his mind about that – in fact, it merely reinforced what he thought and how he felt about them. He then wondered once more why his own family couldn't be like that. He also wondered whether he'd ever start his own family one day, and would they be more like the family in Saskatchewan or the one here. Aidan figured that was for him and his partner-to-be to decide.

"Life is like a card game. We don't decide the cards we're dealt, but how we play those cards is up to each of us. Family's like that. We're not in control of what came before us, but we can use what we have in front of us, each of us according to the best of our abilities. From this, nothing will ever be perfect, but at least it's ours."

His journal now had another helpful entry in it. He was determined to make function whatever family he'd have. He continued listening to the cassette, later slowly dozing off, dreaming of better times ahead.

Seven

The house was quiet. As he figured, no one was around. The morning was Aidan's.

He could never understand how people were able to work such long hours, get so little sleep, and still function the next day – Aidan needed at least eight hours in order to be sociable. In the kitchen, next to the keys on the counter, a note:

*"Hi Aidan,
Take it easy for a couple of days.
No stress. Help out if you want.
Mother."*

Julia called herself "Mother" – nobody else did. If they did, she'd never had the time to listen, due to her busy schedule. In the final analysis, her clients were more important. It never bothered Aidan that Julia called herself "Mother", even though Aidan's mom had died when he was six. Julia was never really around enough for Aidan to consider her his "mother", although she did try.

"Making an effort counts", thought Aidan, who had come to terms with all this long ago, even if John didn't think so.

Julia did think a lot about Aidan and his sisters and took them into consideration for a great many things. And her opinions of John's kids' choices in life could be helpful sometimes, but they could also be considered as unwanted, sometimes meddling, especially when it came to anything related to public appearances – like John, this could at times be to the point of obsession.

Aidan decided he wasn't going to obsess over anything today, except maybe the loosest of schedules – *"two minutes, max"*. First item on the loose agenda: put something in stomach. He looked at the stove clock: "9:30". Breakfast was definitely in order. What wasn't in order was where they kept things and in what state. The coffee maker functioned but looked like it could crack, melt, or blow up at any time, like what had happened once during a past visit. Aidan could never be sure if the coffee maker had already been used that day or if it hadn't been used in weeks. Some days, there was no time for either John or Julia to make coffee, so they got theirs on the fly. Aidan decided to leave the contemplation for later. Taking his chances, he opened the top lid and... nothing! No spent grounds or used filter. He looked at the coffee pot. Spic & span. There was a bit of residual water around the filter basket.

"Recently used, probably this morning. Dodged the bullet there. Now, where are the filters and coffee?"

While the coffee was brewing, and Aidan crossed fingers the coffee-maker wouldn't blow up, he hoped all the fixings for a grilled cheese sandwich would be in good shape. Cheese? Mouldy. Bread? Same. Butter? Fine upon sight and smell. Eggs? Two left, and one day off expiration.

"I doubt they'll miss these."

He looked for anything resembling vegetables. He found green onions and examined them. Nothing rotten. So it was an omelette for breakfast – the grilled cheese sandwich would have to wait. He closed the fridge door. He had long since become immune to the smell of past-due in his parents' fridge, but the less such a smell lingered around him, the better.

John and Julia lived about two clicks away from town centre, surrounded mainly by what farm fields still existed. John had dreamt of coming back to Hatzquiam, where he grew up, feeling he could be isolated enough from his neighbours. The commute to his practice in Bayline was a longer distance than it had been before, but it was always counter-current to rush-hour traffic flow, and he made even better time just driving along the back roads. Aidan suspected that it was during such commutes when John could just be himself and not be terribly concerned about appearances.

Post-breakfast, Aidan was in the garage, looking for John's bike. He wanted to go into town. He tried the bike's old combo lock, hoping the numbers were the same. They were. What weren't the same were the bike's tires: flats front and back. He inspected the tires: real gone, judging by the rusted rim marks on them. He decided to hoof it instead. He judged that the sky wasn't overcast enough for there to be rain. He packed a small umbrella just in case – he hoped it wasn't broken.

The walk was quiet along the dead-end back road where John & Julia lived. Truman's Corners was another matter: Two dead-end roads met Truman Road, the Valley Road, and a regional railway, the same one William had once worked for. Aidan wasn't sure about walking along Valley Road, two lanes wide, all the way to town centre except near North Circle Road. While the road had shoulders, it had no sidewalks to speak of, and there was always traffic galore, buzzing by at this speed or that, depending on how congested the road was. Things hadn't really changed since his high-school days. The locals considered walking along this road a high-risk activity.

From Truman's Corners, he could see his ex' house, half a click away up the other dead-end road. He wondered where she was, how she was doing. He wondered whether he should drop by and say hello. He decided to concentrate on the current road ahead.

Traffic along the old Trans Canada in town centre was calm. Since they completed North Circle Road a few years ago, downtown hadn't seen much traffic. Aidan knew that in most major cities, little car traffic wasn't the end of the world for local businesses. Problem was, Hatzquiam wasn't a major city. It also had limited public transit: one bus that took you to the nearest Skytrain station; two perimeter/shopper bus routes; and the intercity bus for the Lower Fraser Valley, the one that took two hours to amble along from township to village to small city, even detouring to stop at the Abbotsford

Airport. All of these met at the bus terminal on Juneau Crescent, a road parallel to the old Trans Canada, and just down the street from Hatzquiam Mall.

A clutch of cars concentrated in one area made the Mall's parking lot look vacant. Strolling through the Mall, he spied the music store where he and his friends used to go flipping through the vinyl and cassettes, each according to their own. Now, it appeared to be mostly CDs & some cassettes. Aidan knew those cassettes would disappear very soon. He sat on a bench outside the music store, thinking about his friends from high-school; how Tad seemed to have heard of groups like Depeche Mode, English Beat, or The Cure before anyone else at high-school did; how Wendy seemed to follow the crowd; and how Robbie was fascinated with artwork, motorcycles, and Wendy. Seanna tagged along with Wendy and was like Tad but more discriminating in her tastes – she always wanted to know what else there was beyond the store.

Later on, Seanna brought Michelle, who always seemed to go for party-time music, but one got the impression that she listened to other things when no one was paying attention. While Aidan and Michelle stood on opposite sides of the same cluster of record bins, they looked up at each other for a moment and smiled. By her eyes alone, Aidan had recognized Michelle as someone he'd seen from First grade in Bayline.

"Michelle again."

There were times when Aidan was by himself in this music. Sometimes he ran into another classmate, Owen, who never seemed to go anywhere without his guitar. Owen was into music in general and didn't really care about trends, nor about what people thought of his tastes in music, nor the way he dressed, nor anything for that matter. Nothing seemed to get him down, not even other's hang-ups and prejudices. He liked whatever and whomever he liked.

Aidan wondered where these people were and how they were doing. Except Wendy: He knew where she was. Same thing with Tad, who'd told him on a previous visit that Owen was in Toronto or Montreal, but he wasn't sure. Tad was someone else Aidan had to meet up with soon.

The music-store employee appeared to know little of whatever music Aidan had known while in university until recently. In fact, the employee seemed rather clueless about what the store was selling, unless it was something from commercial radio. The store now seemed to carry lots of copies of this type of music. Slowly, Aidan eased his way out of this store. He felt it no longer held any allure for him.

Coffee and doughnuts beckoned Aidan go to the Zeller's cafeteria, still there after all this time. The coffee was standard and the doughnuts nothing to rave about, but this he expected. No taste extravaganza, but no disappointment either. He looked around the place and estimated that his presence lowered the age average to 45 from 68, making him either the young buck or the old man-in-training in the crowd today.

"Writin' a novel, are ya?" an older woman, one table over, asked Aidan, who was writing in his journal.

"Waste of time", said the man sitting with her, coughing a bit. "Like that bloody nephew of yours and his bloody music."

"Well, ma family's always bin musical", she said.

"Doesn't pay the bills. He needs a real job, and so does this young man here", continued the man, coughing some more.

"This here's a journal", said Aidan, "and I'm writing in it. So if there's a law against that, then go call the cops. I'll be right here."

Aidan could see a nearby server trying to conceal a smile. Aidan smirked a little.

Coughing Man examined Aidan up and down and then let out a little cough.

"My husband doesn't luke the words 'lay off' ", said the woman, speaking in what Aidan thought was a West Country accent, though he couldn't be sure.

"Not my problem", said Aidan. "I just came here for coffee and doughnuts. If I'd wanted trouble, I'd've gone to the hotel bar along the old main drag on cheque day."

"They'll close it after Christmas", said Coughing Man.

"No more ringin' in the new year there", said the woman, shaking her head.

Aidan noted some sadness in the way Coughing Man had said that last sentence. Aidan found it difficult to sympathize with this man, seeing that he was just criticized and judged by him. Coughing

Man's words reminded Aidan of how Hatzquiam was changing. Before coming to the mall, he'd noticed that the comic book store he used to go into with Tad and Seanna on certain days after school had reverted to its original coin & stamp configuration, with sports cards added in for good measure. The restaurant Aidan worked at on weekends and some days during the summer had disappeared – fire, apparently. And the ice-cream place where he and his friends once ordered a massive sundae with all the trimmings – *"For 16 people, or four pigs"*, read the sign back then – had become a fast-food restaurant, the very one where he and John had eaten last night, although it was too dark and Aidan was too tired to notice at first.

The Coughing Man had gone to the washroom while Aidan was in his own head. The woman spoke: "Ye'll hafta forgive'im. He was laid-off awhaile back and hasn't been well since."

"I'm sorry to hear that", said Aidan. Aidan finished up and gathered his things to leave. His coffee had grown cold, his doughnut stale. "And for what it's worth, I hope he gets better. Nobody should be in pain."

Aidan walked out calmly and quietly, not really noticing the difficult smile on the woman's face. He needed to leave: The old mall was beginning to depress him.

He walked back out towards the old Trans Canada, where the railway used to cross. He wanted to get in as much sightseeing as he could. He was going to be at his sister's place in a few days, and she didn't live in the area. He saw a sign:

"No vacancy effective Dec. 27"

"Low occupation", said the owner. "Can't compete with other hotels in the area; land taxes too high; not enough money to renovate. So it's closing time. End of story."

Aidan didn't have a tonne of money to spend but upon seeing the hotel bar open decided it better to eat there than to take chances at John & Julia's place. He still had time before afternoon closing. It was one of those places which still closed between 2 and 5pm; this hadn't changed, and neither had the bar itself from the days when Aidan bought his first drink there. Wood finish, dark carpets and drapes, walls with old, framed photos and other paraphernalia, including a station sign from the days when the hotel lobby and bar also served as unofficial waiting areas for trains on the interurban – the same one that Aidan's grandfather had once worked for – before the rails were diverted.

Aidan's family had a lot of history at this bar. Aidan remembered William telling him how he used to have supper and drinks at the hotel bar after getting his pay packet at shift-end and then grab an inspection car, taking it back to storage at Truman's Corners. In the bar, there was a photo of him, freight handlers, and a hostler or two, all nicely framed. Aidan wondered if John had a copy of that photo somewhere within his house.

William was a regular by the time Brit, the bartender on duty, did his first shift. Brit used to serve John from time to time, until John stopped going there. He also served Aidan his first legal drink at age 19.

"Wannit, Aidan?"

"Eh?"

"The photo. D'ya wannit?"

"Well..."

"G'wan. Take it. It's yours. The frame, too. But..."

"But?"

"Ya hafta buy a drink first."

"I'll do you one better and take that drink with lunch."

Brit buzzed the kitchen via intercom: "Jim? Wake up. We gotta live one."

Out came Jim. "Hey, Aidan!"

"Hey, man!" said Aidan. "I haven't seen you..."

"...since high-school. I know. S'been a while. What'll ya have?"

"Grilled cheese sandwich? You still make those?"

"Yessirreebob. An' it's on the house. Gotta get rid of stock, y'know?" Jim went back into the kitchen, smiling.

"I haven't seen you in a while, Aidan", said Brit. "What's it been? Five? Six years?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"So, where ya been?"

"Ontario. Studying."

"Studyin' what?" asked Brit, handing Aidan a pint of lager.

"Vet science."

"An animal doctor? Housepets or livestock?"

"Housepets, mainly. But I've got work experience with livestock, too. Just trying to cover my bases."

"Good man. Cheers."

"Cheers."

"What're the job prospects? Thinking of coming back here?"

"Dunno. And dunno. I just got back yesterday. Still plotting my next move. I hear there's more people around here with pets, but I see lots of vets here."

"Yessir. It's a little crowded around here."

"Speaking of crowded, I hear there're more hotels in the area now."

"Yep. The whole area's growin'. Since they completed the North Circle Road, new businesses've been openin' up there. Can't have a by-pass without businesses on it, else people'll confuse the land for farm fields."

Aidan laughed a little but with regret. "Yeah, and we can't have that, now can we?" he said, sarcastically.

Brit looked at him and laughed a little. "One thing's fer sher, I'm gonna miss this place. Prob'ly good I'm retirin'."

"You? I thought guys like you lived to tell everyone else's tales?"

"Heh, ye're a clown, just like yer granddad. I said retire, not die. I'm not ready to punch that clock yet." They both laughed.

"So, what's the plan post-hotel?"

"I've got a little property up Peachland-way."

"In the OK?"

"Same."

"Do you have a house on it yet?"

"Nope. My brother and I'll spend most of the next year building it. Should be ready by the end of September next."

"So, Peachland, eh? I have a cousin who lives near Naramata."

"That's the other side of the lake."

"Last time I looked, yeh."

"Up the hill? Or lakefront?"

"From what she tells me, lakefront. What about yours?"

"A little uphill from the lake. The highway's got the lakefront. Not complaining, tho'. The view's still good."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Once I get settled there, I'll sell off my property here. And for the price of real estate here these days, I could live off the sale money for quite a while."

"Sounds great. Oh, before I forget: How much?"

As Aidan paid for his drink, he began to wonder whether he'd ever be able to save up for retirement like Brit had. According to some experts, he was already eight years behind in merely starting to put money aside. He wasn't convinced that public pension funds were going to be available once he hit 65.

"Seems a little stupid. Why pay into something if you're not sure to get anything back from it?"

Aidan was sure that John would have a lecture for just such a question, that it'd be Aidan's fault. Knowing how John was going to answer such a question gave Aidan no reason to ask it.

He also remembered that he'd never really visited where Wendy lived. He'd been there for the wedding but the whole affair had been at a church and a reception hall in Penticton. He and Melanie shared a hotel room close by, but neither of them did get to see Wendy's place. This was something else he wanted to sort out in the future.

Back at John & Julia's, Aidan looked at the kitchen.

"Forget the past and future for the moment. Better to deal with the here-and-now."

He started by cleaning out the coffee maker. Logical, since he was the last to use it. Then he noticed that the stove-top needed a good wipe-down. Out came the all-purpose cleaner and paper towels. He looked inside the oven and figured it could do with a clean, too. Next: Sweep-the-floor time. After that, out to the garage to give the beer and wine fridge the same treatment as the stove, only from inside and with water instead of cleaner.

"Yup, it needs cleaning."

Among the unopened beer bottles, Aidan noticed a stubby and wondered why it was still in the fridge.

"Is John saving it? Or has he just forgotten this? Best leave it and ask John later. Clean the fridge and throw nothing out."

Aidan noticed a faint odour coming from the back of the fridge. He wasn't sure what it was but decided the all-purpose cleaner should be with him at all times. Once the inside was done, he then gave the outside a clean, too. Outside, he'd taken a broom to the driveway to deal with the leaves but then changed it for a light rake when it started raining. He sighed.

"Nothing like raking in the rain."

The front walk followed the driveway, then around back, and then the patio. All of it went into the garden composting bin, as usual, more needles and cones than leaves. While in Ontario, he had gotten used to hot summers and cold winters, and by this time of the year, all the leaves were off the trees and the skies were generally grey, all in preparation for winter to come. In this part of BC, trees were more coniferous than deciduous and winters were normally so mild as to be wet and/or cloudy, with whatever snow they received being wet and slushy, sometimes in very small doses, sometimes in huge dumps. Winter wasn't quite "winter" here.

After all that, Aidan looked around for other things to do inside. He opened the dishwasher to see if anything needed to be put away. Inside was an unwashed mass of dining familiarities.

"Two nights worth at least."

Operating household dishwashers wasn't something he knew much about. He'd never had a need for one while he was on his own. Washing dishes by hand was something he could do. He found the dish soap and a scrub-brush, still unopened – *"What a surprise"* – and then set to emptying the dishwasher. Twenty minutes later, everything was washed, dried, and put away, including wine glasses. Aidan shook his head.

"Why the hell would they put wine glasses in the dishwasher? And fragile wine glasses, too. They must like buying new stuff all the time. Then again, they've got the dough."

Lastly, Aidan decided to tackle the bio-chemical disaster-in-waiting that was the main fridge. First thing: inspect the food. He had a garbage bag at the ready and had checked the garbage pick-up schedule on the fridge door. All the trash went into an outside bin, one of those two-barrel jobs with an anti-animal clamp on it, obviating the need for a lock. Minutes passed like hours – *"Einstein was right"* – but he managed to dump at least a third of the stock and then clean the inside of the fridge.

"Julia's going to be so pissed off at me for dumping anything out, but how the hell does she cook? With a gas-mask?"

He explored the back yard a bit, just to see what else he could do. He looked in on the pool house that was built after he left for Guelph. Aidan remembered hearing from Caro how much John loved swimming and did it quite a bit when he was younger. It was probably one consideration for him setting up in Bayline. Aidan also heard that John had thought of going pro in swimming and diving, but like most dreams it kind of came and went, his parents telling him to be realistic and find a real trade. It was perhaps with some vengeance on John's part that he took over his own father's property when William became too old to take care of it and, once in a rest home, put a pool house on the property. The irony wasn't lost on Aidan. John never really revealed much about himself, being concerned with appearances and a good reputation, but this was one thing that John did not go to great lengths to hide from certain people. It was also one thing that Aidan appreciated about John. Aidan unlocked the pool house door, turned on the main lights, and looked around. He then sat in one of the poolside chairs. This was perhaps the quietest place on the entire property. After some minutes, Aidan also

noticed that it was the best-kept part of the entire property. For whatever time constraints John and Julia had, they'd at least made sure the pool house was kept in excellent condition.

Pool house lights having been turned off, door locked, and Aidan back inside the house, he noticed the little light on John and Julia's answering machine blinking. *"Missed call."* Aidan hadn't heard the phone ring while he was in the house nor in the garage.

"Called while in I was in the pool house, probably. Not my problem. It's John's or Julia's business, not mine."

A few seconds later, the phone rang again. Aidan recognized the number on the LED display as being from John's law firm: It'd had the same number for as long as Aidan could remember.

"McGregor residence. Aidan McGregor speaking. How may I abuse you?"

"Fun-nee!" It was Caro. "You should do my job."

"Now who's being funny? So? What's up?"

"I figured I'd call you to say hi and tell you what's up. I'd've done it yesterday, but I know how much sleep you don't get on buses."

"Thanks. That was nice of you."

"Practical is more like it. I don't want to be the victim of bad timing again. Do you remember the last time? I called just after you arrived."

"Do I ever! I was indisposed."

"That's putting it politely."

"Okay, praying to the porcelain god then."

"Did you fare better this time?"

"Well, last time, I was on the bus for three days straight. This time, it was just over a day. Tired, but not sick. Or I got lucky. So, when'll you be on leave?"

"Providing my water doesn't break? Within the next 24 hours. Tomorrow's my last day."

"I guess your replacement's all trained?"

"Yup. I just sent her home. That's another reason I'm calling you now."

"Yeah, about that. I guess I'm still going to be at your place next week?"

"Two days now. I'll need you then."

"No probs. Just point me in the right direction and tell me when to bark."

"What?"

"Sorry. Vet school humour. Sure, I'll be there when you need me."

"Gotta go. I'll talk to you again in two days."

"Right."

"One more thing? Julia's supposed to be home for supper but Dad will work later tonight."

"Gotcha."

"Later. Bye."

Julia got take-out. Chinese. Aidan figured it a good idea to eat as much as possible – fewer leftovers that way. He couldn't complain. However, Julia did complain about Aidan's having thrown out stuff from the fridge.

"What did you expect?" asked Aidan, seeing this coming, matter-of-factly. "I wanted to help, be productive. No offense, Julia, but there were fridges back at university that didn't smell as bad as that. I almost slapped a bio-hazard sticker on it."

Julia still didn't look pleased. "That bad?"

"That bad."

"Hmph."

"Well, you do like to keep things neat and tidy, right?"

She softened a bit.

"And you don't always have the time, right?"

She eyed him while sipping some red from her wine glass.

"Well, since I'm around for two days..."

"Okay, okay. I get it", said Julia. "So, what else did you do today?"

Aidan recounted his day, including the part about hand-washing the dishes.

"You didn't use the dishwasher?" asked Julia, confused.

"I never learned how", said Aidan, shrugging his shoulders. "Besides, doing the dishes by hand can be therapeutic sometimes, as long as I don't zone out while washing knives."

Julia laughed a bit. Aidan smiled.

Back up in his room, Aidan was listening to his cassettes again, attempting either to put things in perspective or to block out the bullshit. Music served both functions for him, but today he wasn't sure which one it was.

Aidan contemplated the day he would take everything out of this room and put it all in another place. He'd thought of this since teenage. He'd always had plans to get his own house somewhere and settle down. But while he was here at John and Julia's, he knew this room as his. Even repainted and partially renovated, he knew it well. He hadn't spent all his time in there when he was younger – he still had school, work, concert band, the rugby team, and friends – but it was all his. It used to be his Uncle Jim's room, which Aidan thought probably galled Richard to no end. Then again, it wasn't as if Uncle Jim had left anything in his old room for Aidan to claim: Jim had removed everything, as Aidan intended to do when he finally found a place. It was the same thing with Aidan's Aunt Hannah: Nothing left in her old room when Caro moved in. Even if there had been, none of Hannah's children would've cared. Melanie got the guest room while John and Julia squeezed into John's old room, which became a study after William was moved into a home. No one else was supposed to go into the study, save John. John and Julia never bothered creating a new guest room. No guests, no bother.

There seemed to be a tradition of "get your shit and get out" in this branch of the McGregors. Aidan figured it came from the days of the farmhouse when the boys shared one room and the girls another, with no private space to come back home to. Whenever he visited the old house in Weir, Aidan never even bothered to look for where his grandfather had slept, as the room had been a part of the house which was later demolished to make way for a staircase to a new add-on. The girls' old room eventually became Maggie's room once Maura's family moved in.

The thought of taking his things into another house began to concern Aidan. He probably wouldn't have his own house for a little while.

"Then again, why would I want a house if I'm the only person in it? Houses are for families, and I don't even have a girlfriend. Yet."

Getting lost in his music, Aidan wondered if he should try to track down its composer/performer. He knew he'd see her at the next grad reunion, though this wasn't a sure thing – aside from her circle of friends, she didn't care much for the rest of the class of 1986. Tad probably knew about her current whereabouts. Tad kept in touch with everyone. Aidan figured there was no rush, and that he'd see her when he saw her. He felt that Tad was another matter, and sooner, if only to have something to do and someone to see.

Aidan also thought about Caro's two kids, only one of whom he'd ever seen and even then when he was a baby. He thought about how kid #3 would be due before Christmas; how almost every family within this branch of the McGregors seemed to have three kids. Even Great-grandpa McGregor was the second of three, with his own father being the first kid born in North America, his older sister having been born near Ringford, Scotland. This wasn't the case with Maggie, though: She was the youngest of seven children, all born in North America and to immigrants from Ayr, Scotland. There was a story within the family that Maggie's side was related to the Scottish poet Aidan Burns, but Aidan found no proof of this and assumed it to be folklore, thinking of how many people must be related to Scotland's Bard.

"If I were to keep at it, I'd get frustrated. A dog chasing its tail. Maybe I should try writing? I'd probably be the first in my family to get published."

Aidan put aside these thoughts, just like he'd done before. He'd had the desire to write since he was 15, but he had no idea about what. Instead, he kept a journal, hoping something might leap out of it one day.

"Travel? Family? Relationships? Studying? Animals? All of the above?"

The music served less and less the meditative escape and more and more the soundtrack to these concerns. He shut it off and went to sleep.

Eight

"Where does your friend work?" asked Julia, out of the blue, driving Aidan toward downtown Vancouver. She'd done a drive-by breakfast, thinking Aidan should at least get hash browns in him before meeting his friend for lunch.

"At a law firm. East Broadway, near Commercial."

"I can take you to Commercial and East 1st, if you want."

Aidan looked at the cheapo watch he bought in Detroit for \$10 four years gone, one that was supposed to crap out after one year: 7:45am. "Well, I don't have to meet him until 11:30."

"You don't mind being stuck downtown until then?"

"Nah. I'll find things to do. I haven't seen downtown in a while."

"You'll find it's changed quite a lot."

From the moment he was let off at Georgia and Granville, Aidan noticed straight away that Julia hadn't been kidding: It had changed a lot. The video arcade on the corner was now a drug store. A former concert venue along Granville had closed up, as had a cinema, another arcade, a burger place he used to like, and a comic book store. One place where he used to buy music, which started as a stereo/radio store, got rid of the music and reverted to its original function. Lots of clothing and discount stores lined the street, more than Aidan remembered. On Robson Street – or "Robsonstrasse", as was now marketed – he saw what had become of it: Cafés, restaurants, a new out-sized bookstore, more clothing and discount stores, as well as what looked like a roman-looking coliseum being built. The old Vancouver Public Library at the corner of Burrard and Robson looked in bad shape. Aidan used to go to the VPL on occasion whenever John or Julia had business in downtown Vancouver. He used to look at books on animals, trains, cars, boats, and scandals involving the odd past BC Premier, as well as studies of engineering disasters such as bridges that bounced and flopped in moderate winds only to fall to pieces soon after. He was never sure why political scandals interested him at all. Same with bouncy bridges.

Minutes passed like hours as Aidan strolled from downtown to Commercial Drive, passing by the old Expo site.

"She once worked here. Michelle again."

"Aidan!" said Tad, outside his work. "What is up, my man? It's been too long."

"Yeah, hasn't it just?"

"Four years."

"Four...? Why does it feel like less than that?"

" 'Cause we stayed in touch all that time."

"Heh! Yeh. That must be it. So?"

"So?"

"Let's eat! I'm starving!"

"You and your stomach."

"Well, I didn't eat much this morning."

"Back at John and Julia's?"

"Yep."

"Say no more. Let's get fed. Here, this place."

"Looks new."

"Very astute, Poirot. Just opened two weeks ago."

"I've never tried Thai food."

"I was here last week. It's good. Not too spicy. Trust me."

Aidan looked at Tad curiously. "Not too spicy? You usually take your spice at dynamite level."

Tad laughed a bit. "Relax. Your stomach will be fine."

"Yeh, my stomach isn't what I'm worried about."

They were lucky to have gotten a table inside: The restaurant was almost full. Tad said things were unlikely to change, the owners preferring no reservation system.

"No fear. I betcha there'll be other restaurants like this in a year or two. You know how new places work here", said Aidan.

Tad rolled his eyes. "Sheeyah, tell me about it. Pretty soon every neighbourhood will want to have at least two places like this."

"It'll be all the rage."

Tad shook his head and smiled.

Looking at their menus, Aidan asked Tad: "So? What's it like working for lawyers?"

"On a scale from one to ten? Not bad. The hours are kinda long but no complaints from me."

"Oh no?"

"The lawyers work longer hours. And I get the odd long day."

"When does that happen?"

"Let's put it like this: I'll be working a bit later tonight."

"Oops."

"Nah, no problem. None at all. Now, if you'd called me tomorrow..."

"You also work on Saturday?"

"Sometimes, yeh, but not tomorrow. I'll be sleeping in."

"I think I made that mistake back in high-school."

"What, calling me while I was sleeping? Pfft, like once."

They both laughed. Somewhere in all their conversation, the waitress had come and taken their orders.

Tad asked Aidan: "So, back in Hatzquiam? Must be strange for you."

Aidan's eyes widened a bit and he smiled with a slight nod. "Yeah, that's one way of putting it. Lots of sprawl, fewer farms. The North Circle Road..."

"They finally started that? Talking about that for years."

"They've finished it."

"Nice that they finally did it."

"Well, maybe not so nice. Downtown's fading."

"Something about sprawl, I imagine?"

"Yep."

"What about home?"

"John and Julia's? Not much change there, 'cept for the new pool house."

"Finally got that built, too? Must be nice having that kinda dough."

"Well, they are lawyers."

"Fair point."

"Traffic's still shit on the Valley Road. The old gas station near John's place has seen better days but it's still standing. Coal trains still rumble through twice a day, so no change there."

"Do ya ever think they'll 4-lane the Valley Road?"

"Not in my lifetime, I'm sure."

"No traffic light at Truman's Corners?"

"You mean at 'Truman', 'cause that's what they call it now. No, that'd probably make things worse."

"*Tt!* Pretentious."

Aidan broke the silence 10 minutes after the server had brought their orders. "So, have you heard from...?"

Tad shook his head. "Not a peep. Been almost a year."

Aidan looked at Tad curiously. "Almost a year?"

"Yeah, so I don't know how she's doing."

Aidan smiled. "You two are usually quite good about keeping in touch."

"Sure, but she moves around so much, y'know? We lose contact with each other once in a while. Frankly, it worries me sometimes."

"How so?"

"One time, I got a postcard from her telling me she was in Australia and engaged to marry. I wrote back, but then I heard nada."

Aidan's shoulders wanted to slump. "So, married. That's great news", he said, unenthusiastically.

"That's the thing, man. No. The guy cheated on her. She was pretty down after that. Six months after my letter, I get one from her. New address: Bangkok. Good thing too, so she said: She needed to be elsewhere."

"I can imagine. The memories..."

"More like for the sake of his health. You know what she's like when she gets angry."

"Not first-hand, lucky me, but yeah, I've heard stories. So, Bangkok?"

"And after that, India, Qatar, Turkey. Eastern Europe, too."

"I guess working at Expo really changed her perspective."

"Expo changed everyone's perspective."

"So, what about Seanna?"

"I see her once in a while. She's not looking so great these days."

"How's that?"

"She's got something. She won't say what. They've got her on meds for it."

"That doesn't sound all that great."

"My turn. Wendy?"

"We haven't spoken in a while. She's still in the OK, married, one child, doing okay from the last I'd heard. Hubby's good to her."

"I remember that guy being interested in the Commune. Turned out he was more interested in Wendy."

"I guess. I didn't live with all of you. Remember?"

"This is true. So, downtown Hatzquiam? What's still around? What's closed down?"

"When was the last time you were there?"

"Like, four years ago?"

Aidan told Tad about the Hatzquiam Hotel.

"Sad, but it's kinda an old-man bar, isn't it?"

Tad often spoke with question tags. His old man was educated in the UK and took on some of their affectations. When Aidan last saw Tad's father, he was still saying "bob" to mean a Canadian dollar and pronounced migraine as "mee-grain". Fortunately, Tad only picked up the question tags from his father, causing some teachers to refer to them as "Tad endings".

"Well", said Aidan, "I suppose. I think it's quaint, warm, welcoming. Sure, it's not flashy or anything. Nobody ever installed a disco ball or strobe lights in it."

"I'm surprised the bar survived the disco era with no changes."

"And aside from the Legion Hall, it was one of two bars open back in the day. Not that any of us could legally drink before we finished high-school."

"Except Owen."

"Speaking of...?"

"Still living and loving in Montreal, studying and hanging out with poets, writers, performers, artists, other musicians. They call themselves 'ABC'. He once told me it stood for 'Algonquin Beat Canyon'."

Aidan laughed a bit. "The name doesn't sound all that serious. I imagine he really meant, 'Whatever you like it to mean'."

"Exactly, Holmes."

They both laughed. Tad also had a tendency to nickname people in conversation according to the subject at hand. It used to annoy Aidan but he eventually accepted it, amused.

Tad continued: "So Hatzquiam's not quite the place you left it, eh?"

"No. Yeah. I don't know. All the things I liked about the place are changing. And things I don't really care for, well... It's happening all over the place, sure,..."

"...but why there. Why do you think I stay away from that place?"

"Cause it's boring?"

"No way! I was like totally in my element there, but I saw what was coming. So, like, where to next, man?"

"In life? Not sure. The 'what' is all fine. The 'where'? That's another story. I thought I wanted to stick around Hatzquiam but now I'm not so sure. Maybe Vancouver Island."

"Up-Island or Down-Island?"

"Well, Mel's in Victoria, so maybe that's the place to start. Dunno. In any case, I've only been back for two days. My head's still one-half back in Saskatchewan and the other half in Ontario. You said Seanna's not in great health?"

"...he said, changing the subject. Nah, man, not great. You wanna meet up with her or something?"

"Yeah, something. I've still got some of her cassettes from high-school."

"Don't giv'em back, man. She never lends anything out. When she gives, she gives." Tad took out pen and paper. "Here's her number. Give her a ring and see what she says."

"Thanks. Hey."

"Yah?"

"Robbie Simpson."

"Mystery mobile, Freddie. The last I heard, he was motorbiking around Toronto – before that, Ottawa a bit – but that's all I know."

"Well, if he's still there, I hope he doesn't run into my ex."

"Which one?"

Aidan recounted how his recent relationship had ended.

"Nice burn about games", said Tad. "What she did? Man, that wasn't cool. But I don't know, tho'. If you don't mind me saying so..."

"Course I mind," said Aidan, smiling, "but you're gonna say it anyway."

"I think you go out looking for that type; sometimes; subconsciously, I mean."

"Yeh, I know."

"I don't think we'd be talking about her if I hadn't said 'Toronto'."

"Fer sher. Anyway, I figured on nothing further happening, so I kinda planned for that. Travelling put me farther away from it. Chicago put me in another mindset."

"You were in Chi-town? Jealous."

"Yeah, it was quite the tour. You've never been?"

"Never. West Coast only. BC, Washington, Oregon, Cali. Acapulco, even."

"What's stopping you? Time? Money?"

"Nah, man. I've got everything here. You, on the other hand..."

"I like to travel. What can I say?"

"But not the living-out-of-your-suitcase variety, right?"

"I did that for a few days. No, it didn't suit me."

"You prefer living in one place. Now, Michelle, she's got no problem living out of her backpack." Tad head-signalled quizzingly. "You're still thinking about her, aren't you?"

"Not until you mentioned her, no. But coming back here, back to Hatzquiam...". Aidan smiled and raised his hands open. "Memories. Memories of her, and our 'places'."

"Considering your luck with the opposite sex, I'd say she was the best relationship you've had to date."

"You're probably right." Aidan looked down at the table.

"What? Spill it."

Aidan looked at Tad and smiled. Tad more often than not picked up on things that most others tended to overlook, more than people gave him credit for. "Strange thing: When I talked about memories and places, it wasn't just of her. Everyone, in fact. No matter where I return to, there's no one I know. A stranger in my own place."

Tad shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say? That's life, man. We move on."

"But everyone?"

"Yup." He bunched his lips and nodded. "But for now, life is for living. And lunch is on me."

The shop windows of "The Drive" tempted Aidan. Julia would swing by 1st and Commercial later on for a speedy, rush-hour pick up. Til then, Aidan had time to tool around.

After a while, he pulled out the note Tad had written and looked at Seanna's number. He pondered things for a bit. His gut said don't call now, but his curious mind said otherwise.

"Sorry?" asked a tired voice on the other end of the line. "Who's this?"

"Is this Seanna?" asked Aidan.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Aidan."

"I don't know anyone named Aidan." She hung up.

"Note to self: Trust gut next time."

He hung up the pay-phone and figured on trying again later. He hoped Seanna would be in a better state.

Nine

"Not much to it, but it's free and I have no other place to stay", thought Aidan, looking at the basement suite at Caro's.

This wasn't entirely true. After finally realizing that Aidan really was going to Caro's place, John had offered to let him stay longer at his house. John could be strange that way. However, John's place wasn't always near things nor convenient. Caro was only a 10-minute walk from the bus stop nearest her place. Plus being closer to Vancouver than John made it a no-brainer. There was also the additional consideration that being around Hatzquiam was starting to make him feel depressed. The late-season may not have helped his mood or matters much. But Aidan felt he needed to get his mind off of Hatzquiam, his ex, and anything related to the two. Caro's place was a good start.

He also figured it'd be nice to be around Caro's kids for a while.

"Dot", said Caro, breaking Aidan's lost-in-thought moment.

"Dot?" asked Julia.

"Short for Dorothy Parker Anderssen", said Caro, holding her newborn and looking at her affectionately. Dot came into this world two weeks late according to the doctor. Caro's big stress was about complications that never arrived. "Yeah, that's your name."

Julia thought the name lacked class and style. Caro didn't give a rat's. Julia decided to switch her disappointment towards Melanie, the youngest, who couldn't be there.

"Oh leave her be", said Caro. "It's rush time for her. Exams are next week."

"Still...", Julia started.

"She'll see Dot at Christmas", said Caro, smiling at her new baby.

"Maybe she'll call", offered Aidan. "You never know."

"Yeah, she does tend to do that when you least expect her to", said Caro.

Aidan felt relieved. Caro's kids' behaviour was never a problem for her to manage, but putting her foot down concerning Julia was another matter. Aidan knew from experience not to come between Caro and Julia, even politely, when they were having it out.

"Can I hold her?" asked Ben, Caro's son.

"Not yet. You're not big enough."

"Aw."

Caro looked her son in the eyes, sweetly but sternly. The boy knew not to press the point.

Ten

Aidan wasn't too thrilled. Christmas was approaching, and he'd never been the best at gift-shopping.

He'd taken stock of what he could at John and Julia's place but soon concluded that they had entirely too many possessions and would probably lose anything new in all that. He figured they'd get offended if he gave them a restaurant gift certificate inside a Christmas card, but he decided to do just that.

Caro wasn't difficult to please. She liked coffee, scented candles, wine, and chocolate liqueurs. Aidan figured she'd want to get more into the wine, considering that she hadn't drunk while pregnant. Her husband liked Aidan enough that he was fine with a gift certificate to any tool-and-building-supply place. The kids were a breeze.

That just left Melanie, and one other person. For Melanie, Aidan really had no clue. He figured on taking care of the others first, and hopefully, inspiration would be kind enough to pay him a visit.

The phone rang, sidetracking Aidan's gift-shopping dilemma.

"John's office number hasn't changed since forever." It was Seanna.

"True", said Aidan.

"Sorry about last month. I was really out of it. Tad called me later and asked if you'd called, and I thought, 'Oh shit! That Aidan!'"

"No worries", lied Aidan. "Hey, I'd like to meet up at some point."

"Sure. I'll be pretty busy til mid-December. Maybe between Christmas and New Year's?"

"Good enough. I'll call you back then."

"Alright."

Aidan got a strange feeling that Seanna really wasn't all right. For now, he put that aside. He had to figure out where to go to get stuff, and to a place which wasn't nearby. It suddenly occurred to him that he had yet to visit his hometown of Bayline since getting back. He decided to do as much housework as possible today so as to free up tomorrow. When Caro learned about this, she offered to drive him there. Aidan made up the excuse that he wanted to be alone for at least half a day, if that was all right with Caro.

"Whatever needs to be done" was her response.

Passing by thinning-out woods, down a hill, by pastures and manure farms, all of which would've probably been under water 5,000 years ago, and up and over another hill, Aidan reached Bayline's northern-most limit – he could just make out the American landmass opposite Bayline. Between him and the USA, the bay, downhill from his position. That's where he wanted to go. John's practice was on the way, but Aidan decided not to stop in and say hi. No point. He was there to see the old place, sure, but he was also there to shop for Christmas gifts, and he didn't want to tip John off. Plus the day was getting sunnier and warmer. He didn't feel like spending more time indoors than he had to.

Aidan had lived here until age 15. He recalled many rainy days. It wasn't for no reason that people referred to this region as "the Wet Coast". This made every one of his subsequent visits to Bayline quite strange, as the sun always shone, no matter the temperature.

As he walked downhill south from where the bus fetched up, the view of the bay unfolded before him: It was something he never got tired of seeing. Some parts of the hill down to the water were steep enough that streets became staircases. No cars there. Before getting to any staircase, Aidan passed by his old elementary school. This was where he'd first met Michelle. They didn't really know each other then and there. After the record store, Aidan saw Michelle once more and told her that he remembered her from before and never forgot a beautiful pair of eyes. Michelle had been flattered by this.

Again. Thoughts of Michelle. And for such a short relationship. He hadn't really thought of her much since he moved away from BC some years ago. He'd been too caught up in his studies and his family outside of BC to think much about her.

"Out of sight, almost out of mind."

Now, in Bayline, it hit him full-force, much to remind him, remind him of her.

Except that she was nowhere in sight.

Aidan decided to look at Bayline as it was in front of him, rather than how he once knew it. He wondered if it were possible to do the same thing with Hatzquiam. He wondered if in the long term he should think about moving somewhere else, perhaps outside the Greater Vancouver area. He looked across the water and saw the faint outline of the Gulf Islands in the distance – beyond that, Vancouver Island.

"Maybe I'll visit Mel there one day."

Some stairs and another road later, he arrived at the waterfront promenade. Much of it was under renovation. They were putting in pave-stones to replace the old asphalt and connect the two beaches through what had been private property since the 1970s, courtesy of railroad that went through Bayline. The old train station was still open but as a museum and art gallery, its outer lines still very much the same. At the museum's gift shop, he checked two things off his shopping list.

Cards were a problem for Aidan. He had a disdain for corny or formulaic commercially-made cards. He found a small store off of Main Drive, which specialized in handcrafts and just the type of cards he was looking for. He bought one more card than necessary for reasons unclear to him – it had been his

tendency for many years, and this was originally based on a gut feeling. He found a few gift items at this place and also something he thought Melanie might like, plus one more thing, just in case. Mission accomplished.

Now he had to find where they sold alcohol these days. Ever since they deregulated and allowed for beer and wine stores, Aidan had no idea where to go. He decided to err on the side of caution and go to the government liquor store. Beyond that? John and Julia's gift certificate. Aidan had asked Caro her opinion – she had more recent experience in this matter.

A local had told him where to find the government liquor store. As the bus went up the hill, Aidan looked out on the bay, the lines in the distance a little more pronounced – sentinels watching over what was in between – giving a better picture of the Gulf Islands. A part of him felt like he should be there, running a farm on Saltspring Island, the largest island, away from the memories of here, where he could live in relative peace. He and Melanie visited Saltspring with his grandparents when they were younger. William was looking for property, possibly for retirement. John was too busy with work to go, and Caro decided she'd rather spend time over at a friend's, leaving Aidan and Melanie to enjoy time with William and Alma. It was a fun weekend taking the ferry over and back again and driving all-around in between. Aidan wasn't sure but he figured visiting Saltspring Island played a role in Melanie later choosing UVic for her university studies. Sadly, their grandparents never even had the chance to buy a property there: Alma passed away shortly after, and William stayed in Hatzquiam, never to visit any of the Gulf Islands. John and Julia had no interest in going there, so Aidan had to wait until just after high-school to visit again, when his old gang went cycling and camping on both Pender Islands the weekend after grad. Aidan remembered Michelle having to get four days off of work at Expo just to be there. He also remembered he and Michelle making love on a clifftop overlooking the Otter Bay ferry terminal.

Again, Michelle. Another memory. Another association.

"That was over eight years ago."

He began to wonder if he ought to see a psychiatrist. He decided instead to write it down in his journal once back at Caro's.

"It'll be cheaper."

He couldn't recall if he and Michelle had been to Victoria.

"Maybe I should visit Mel for two or three days."

Aidan let out a sigh.

"Why should I run away from any of this? Because she's not here? Maybe I took all this for granted before she came along. And now I can't enjoy this on my own? That's not right. She's not to blame. Nobody is. She's a small heart upon a large wall. A small, noticeable heart. But Tad was right: She was my best relationship. Those were good times. I'm only 26. I'm too young to be so nostalgic. How do I know that my best days aren't ahead of me? Who decided that there was only a single highpoint in one's life? People talk about the best times and the best music, but they're always the best in relation to what came before. Who said nothing great could follow much later on? Post History? What the Hell? History is always being made. We just have to open our eyes and see it. I have to..."

Aidan felt like his own eyes had just opened. He knew nobody here. He had the chance of a fresh look at everything before him. He was determined to make good times out of whatever came his way.

Eleven

Christmas Eve dinner at John & Julia's had been a compromise. Caro was quite insistent on Christmas Day supper being held at her place this year. All Aidan's immediate family was there, save Mel, who was at her friend's place not so far away. Aidan was to have stayed the night at John and Julia's, but that plan came crashing down when, in Aidan's estimation, the whole evening turned into a minor fiasco – something about how Aidan should be his own man by doing what everyone else does, or some other contradictory nonsense.

Aidan decided not to stick around for dessert and instead went back to Caro's place to sit out Christmas Eve there. He grabbed his Christmas booty and left. He had anticipated this happening. He brought some mad money and the phone number for a taxi in case he had to get the heck out of

Dodge. After walking a half-click in the dark, he went inside the gas station at Truman's Corners. Before he could ask if he could use the phone, the guy behind the counter said, "Hey, Aidan. Long time, no see."

A glimmer of recognition, followed by "Hey Vince!" Vince's family had been running this gas station since the beginning of the 1900s, back when it served farmers, the odd lost traveller, and railroad workers like William. Vince asked Aidan if he'd moved back to Hatzquiam but he said no, only BC, only his dad still lives around here. Vince said he hadn't seen Aidan's dad much recently, nor anyone else in Aidan's family for that matter. Aidan asked Vince how his family was doing and was curious as to why he was working on Christmas Eve.

"My kids aren't old enough to work here yet", he said, half-sarcastically. "And most of my family've moved away. I'll probably work here on holidays for a while yet. I've had offers to sell the place but I'm not sure I want to give up the family business."

"That's a tough call", Aidan said. "I just moved back from southern Ontario and I saw how owners like you decided to sell off their family's garage and gas station. What a change."

"Good or bad?"

"Good, if you're a customer who likes 24-hour service and picking up a few groceries after hours. Bad, because there's no personality in the service. Like, you can remember the names and faces of pretty much anyone who comes in here on a regular basis, right? You recognized me, and it's been, what, eight years?"

"Yup."

"Well, in a chain place, the service is still good and polite, but who remembers your face? Your name? Who can tell you from Adam?"

"That's the shits."

"I hope you stay in the game for a long time, Vince. Otherwise, this whole area's gonna lose something it'll never get back."

Vince's eyebrows arched. He asked what brought Aidan out here so late, so Aidan explained his situation.

"Man, that's rough", said Vince. "Used to be we waited til after Christmas dinner before getting all drunk and squirrely, but I think your family is setting a trend, my friend."

Aidan said, "and not a good one either. Let's hope tonight will be the first and the last of that, eh?"

"Fer sher, man. Say, do you want me to call a taxi for you?"

Aidan was about to say yes when a woman came into the gas station.

"Aidan McGregor! Sure it's you, isn't it?"

Aidan smiled despite himself: He remembered her quite well. "Hey, Jee. Merry Christmas", said Aidan. She'd always been quick on the draw and good at remembering names and faces. She was also one of Michelle's older sisters.

"Merry Christmas to you, too. And you, Vince."

"Right back at ya, Jee. So, what brings you out here so late in the evening?" asked Vince.

"The usual", Jee said, smiling, pointing to the cigarettes. She'd been smoking the same brand for years. "That, and the engine my dad & I waited for finally arrived in the late afternoon. Big project. Probably his last, too."

"Why's that?" Aidan asked, his curiosity genuine. Her dad was ex-military, from the mechanic's pool, turned engineer. By the time Aidan first met him in his last year of high school, Jee's father had retired from the day-to-day of being an engineer and went back to his old job as a mechanic, focusing on the restoration of old engines and vehicles. Collectors and certain museums paid well to have such vehicles in good order, be they static or operational.

"Oh, he's slowing down. Age. We all get older. But him? He had a little workplace accident a few years ago. He's more cautious than he used to be. Takes fewer chances. What about you, Aidan?"

Aidan told Jee what he told Vince.

"Oof! That's hard. I guess that's one family dinner that could've gone better, eh?"

"Uh-huh."

"Look, I'm heading back to my place in Hopeville. My family needs to be reminded that I still exist. I can drop you off in town, if you want."

"Uh, sure."

"But only if you manage to utter more than two syllables."

"Yeah, sure, I'd like that", he said, trying not to laugh.

"Night, Vince! Go home to your family soon, eh?"

"Yeah, soon. Night!"

As they got in the car, Aidan had to ask: "So, how's...?"

"Travelling", she said, rolling her window down then lighting a cigarette. "Where, no one knows."

"Oh?" said Aidan, a little stunned.

Jee exhaled smoke out the window. "Not a peep from her in months. Not even a postcard."

"Not even a Christmas card?"

"Not that I've seen. Maybe my Da saw it and brought it in." Jee hauled and exhaled again. "We miss her. So? You? Family affairs aside..."

Aidan smiled in recalling that aspect of Michelle's family, how the kids called their French-Canadian father "Da" and their Irish ex-pat mother "M'ma". He didn't understand why back then but had a better idea of it now. He gave her the short version of his life to this date.

"Veterinarian, eh?" said Jee. "Practising yet?"

"Not yet. Soon, I hope."

"Good luck with it."

"I get the feeling my luck's about to change soon. Can't explain why."

"Gut feelings? Yeah, I get those all the time. Whatever you do, don't ignore them."

Aidan couldn't help smiling. Jee's demeanour was similar to Michelle's. "So you live south of town now? And family? Kids?"

"Just one. A daughter. Lee. She's my spittin' image. Quite the little comic, too." She took another drag. "You? Family?"

Aidan felt uncomfortable with that question.

"Well, being in a relationship has never been a big problem with me. It's the people I choose to be in a relationship with that get to be problematic with me. Hmm, no, that's not accurate. My exes have always been people who've had incompatible plans with mine. No. That's not 100% either. I've always felt the people I've been in relationships with were merely people whose paths merged with mine for a while and then diverged wildly – or maybe my plans diverged wildly from theirs; I'm not sure; Jee probably isn't, either. Play it neutral."

"No, no family", Aidan said, smiling. "Right now, I'm between relationships. Not really looking either."

Jee smiled back at him. "Like Michelle, or at least from the last time he'd heard from her. Is the bus terminal okay for you?"

"Yeah. Sure. Thanks." For Aidan, he knew this was the cheaper option: a bus that goes from downtown Hatzquiam to Caro's neighbourhood, once an hour but direct. He figured to make it home before Caro. And Aidan could save on cab fare; good thing, considering he didn't know what cab fare was for this area.

She pulled up to the bus terminal. They said their goodbyes and Merry Christmases. "Hey, Aidan?" Jee asked him as he was about to get out of the car. "You remember what I said about not ignoring your gut feelings? That goes for relationships, too. When you meet that special someone, somehow, you'll know."

Aidan smiled. He felt optimistic.

Caro's place was empty when Aidan arrived 45 minutes later. He had no idea when to expect her back, save her mentioning something about being home before 10. Aidan looked at his watch: Ten would be a while yet.

He dropped off his Christmas stuff in his basement room, all carpeted but with some grey from the foundation still present in the walls. He took out his journal and began to write. He thought about Jee's words: about gut feelings and not ignoring them. He always thought he'd done that, but the last couple of times made him question the relationship between him & his gut. He felt that maybe, underlying all this, he'd tried too hard to make things more solid and less fluid in his life. He wondered if this all came from certain destabilizing factors in his life: his mother dying when he was little; his dad remarrying a

few years later; the family moving from Bayline to Hatzquiam in the middle of his teenage years; Aidan feeling like he had wanted to spend more time in Hatzquiam. No matter where he stood, many things seemed to move too fast for him.

He felt he should count himself lucky to have done many things while growing up. When he was younger, he gave up trying to impress his parents, or anyone for that matter, save himself. This seemed to vex a lot of people, his parents included, with some people wondering where was his consideration for others, although nobody could bring themselves to say that he was egotistic. There was one person he wanted to impress – himself – and this proved to be quite difficult.

He knew he could've had it worse. He recalled one other boy in his early high-school years whose father always seemed to prevent him from doing what he liked or discouraged him from anything he was curious about. When someone in his family suggested that he needed a big brother, his father wouldn't hear of it, insisting he'd be there for his children, even though he wasn't. When the subject of being an exchange student came up, his father vetoed it, insisting that he stay home. When it was offered to his sister, the father immediately gave his approval, only for her to change her mind – at least she had a choice. Then there was Katimavik. After getting positive results from a cousin, and having expressed interest in it, the father nixed that idea. And that was that. It was understandable if the boy appeared frustrated at times. Aidan figured this boy's parents had tried to shelter him, as if venturing outside BC's borders made one disparage the place upon return.

"Which is patently absurd. So why would anyone put down BC? Truth is, nobody really does. Still, some imagine that others do – people who seem to think that mention of any other place should provoke a defensive comparison, as if to say 'We're still better than that other place you were mentioning'. Completely unnecessary. BC has some of the best scenery in the world. If one doesn't like snow, southwestern BC is like paradise, with mild temperatures and the occasional stretch of sunny days. To me, my hometown of Bayline is one of the most beautiful places on a sunny day. It can be quite nice on a not-so-sunny day, too."

Writing all this down in his journal, Aidan had to wonder if such a strange attitude played into how John and Julia saw his life and his studies in Ontario, especially given the discussion-degenerating-into-a-shouting-match that was supposed to be Christmas Eve dinner.

Aidan decided that was enough ink spilt for the evening and turned on the TV. He sat there, emptying his mind in front of the tube.

"And they had to argue about Mel, too, and she wasn't even there to defend herself."

He sighed, disappointed that he couldn't let the matter drop, even mentally. He smiled quite suddenly.

"Mel – it's been so long since I've seen Melanie. The last time was at Wendy's wedding. Maturity made Caro & I better around each other. Mel & I have always been on sympathetic wavelengths. She always watched out for me when my back was turned, and I was always the protective older brother. Sometimes, this resulted in us ganging up on Caro whenever Caro was having a bad day and decided one of us was a convenient punching dummy."

During the time that Aidan and Melanie hadn't seen each other, they wrote to each other, mainly letters but also postcards. He eventually got letters from Melanie's friend, and in some of those letters were photos.

"It'll be good to see Mel again."

He allowed himself the luxury of forgetting this evening's hullabaloo. It's a Wonderful Life came on the TV. He dozed off, happy.

Twelve

Depending on how things went, Aidan figured he'd start his post-university life properly in the New Year. Until then, he still had to get through Christmas dinner.

Earlier Christmas morning, Caro's two oldest kids were all over Aidan, trying to wake him up. During a tickle-wrestling session with them, Caro came down and snapped a few pics of this sight – it was worth a chuckle or twelve. Aidan thought her reaction a good sign: She'd been very tense over Christmas dinner preparations.

Caro had mentioned late last night that Julia was in a snit and had to be arm-twisted to come over for Christmas dinner. This made Caro overly-concerned about things. Aidan knew his sister well enough to know that from this point forward everything had to be pleasing-the-Queen perfect, even the laces on Dot's baby slippers.

Aidan threatened to dress like a slob if she didn't relax and simply do her best. To make matters worse, Caro had forgotten that Melanie was going to bring a friend from university over for Christmas dinner, then she was frantic. Now she also had to be concerned with how to seat everyone as well. Aidan offered to sit at the kids' table if it freed up a space. Caro laughed but then asked Aidan in a flippant tone if he had invited anyone over, too. Aidan said, "Only if they'll help you with the preparations."

Her phone rang. "Aidan!"

"Just a short call to say Merry Christmas!" said Maura, over the line.

"Merry Christmas to you, too! So, what's on today's agenda?" Aidan asked.

"Well, right now, mum & I are preparing parts of Christmas dinner."

"Starting early?"

"We have to. It's already 1pm. Lots of people coming over later."

Aidan looked at the clock on the wall: 11am. "I keep forgetting about the time difference. And I used to live in the Eastern time zone!"

"I did say it'd be a short call. Are those kids I hear giggling?"

"Yeah. My sister's."

"And here I thought you'd been hiding something from me all the while. I'll call you in a few hours. The rest of dinner should be cooking at that point, so I can devote more time to you & your family. And my family will all be here, so you can say season's greetings to them."

"Okay. Later then!"

"Who was that?" asked Caro, as Aidan hung up the phone.

"Maura, our cousin."

"Will I ever get to say hello to her?"

"Didn't you say 'hello' when you picked up the phone?"

"Smartass. Seriously..."

"What can I say? You've never met her. You don't know her and've never cared to. Seriously, what would you've said to her?"

Caro looked astonished but then laughed a little.

"Besides, she said it was a short call."

"Okay, you're off the hook."

"She told me she'd call back in a few, when she's less busy, so you'll get a chance to say more than hello later."

"Will she have anything to say to me?"

"Probably. She's never met you but she does know about you – by the way, you're welcome – and Mel. She's already met John & Julia. Dick, too."

"Was that a good thing?" Caro asked, having relaxed a little more.

"Things could've been worse. But Maura knows how to handle people. As for him, what can I say? Dick by name, dick by nature."

"Why didn't you tell us about this before?"

"You weren't interested."

"Weren't...? Since when?"

"Since always. You've always told me, 'our immediate family is complicated enough without bringing extended family into it'."

Caro never liked it when people quoted her. Aidan thought it was quite flattering when someone quoted him.

"Uncle Aidan!" It was Caro's oldest girl, Haley. "Come play with me!"

"Well, we can't keep you waiting, can we?" he said to Haley, then turning to Caro, "We can talk about this later, if you want."

Caro smiled.

It was almost impossible to pry Caro from the phone once she and Maura got to talking. They'd been at it for 30 minutes when the doorbell chimed. When Caro told Aidan that Mel was bringing a friend, Aidan assumed it was this new guy in her life, the one she'd had Christmas Eve supper with. Mel had told Aidan in her letters that she'd had a few good relationships, but in the end, these guys had treated her like dirt.

Caro was still on the phone, and her hubby was in the garage working on his wood lathe, leaving just Aidan to answer the door. The door wasn't fully open two seconds when Aidan got the full-hug treatment from Mel.

"Merry Christmas! It's been too long! I missed you! You're as warm as the day is long!" said Melanie.

Aidan practically lifted her off the ground hugging her. Haley laughed. She'd never seen Mel & Aidan hugging, much less in the same room together.

"It's so good to see you again", said Aidan. "Four years is too long."

"Hi, Aidan."

Aidan looked at who Mel had brought with her.

Mel pointed towards her friend. "I'm sure you recognize Talia from recent photos."

Natalia, or "Talia" to her friends, was Mel's roommate and also a friend from high-school. Talia's older sister, Liane, was friends with Caro in high-school, too. Aidan had had a crush on Gail, the oldest sister, and Caro knew it. Aidan was too shy at the time to tell Gail anything and regretted it once he did, getting the burn of his life. That event changed him, made him a little bolder. But on seeing Talia, Aidan became a little mesmerized. Melanie had apparently told Talia things about Aidan, resulting from their letters. Talia decided she had more and more of an interest in him. Likewise, Melanie told Aidan that someone was curious about him. Aidan and Talia got to know each other quite well from writing each other, even including recent photos in them. Aidan had thought about her once in a while but had no romantic aspirations at the time. Talia started to have different ideas when she'd heard that Aidan had put Malvena behind him.

"Hey, Aidan", said Talia, "Good to see you in person again. No change from the photos, I see."

"Well, I could dye my hair gray, if you think I should."

She laughed a little. "Nah, I'll wait til you're older."

They couldn't take their eyes off of each other. Aidan wasn't sure why. Talia neither. It wasn't like they hadn't seen each other before, but somehow things were different this time, and neither one felt like questioning it.

"Y'know", said Melanie, "I'm going to make a bet. If you two ever get married, within three months, Talia, you'll be pregnant."

Aidan smiled and almost laughed at this. Melanie always seemed to know when things were going to happen. Aidan could never figure that out but was content that she'd said that all the same.

Talia looked bizarrely at Melanie. "What makes you think we'll ever get married? Don't you know that you don't have to be married to have kids these days?"

Melanie smiled at the two of them.

Talia and Aidan were still smiling at each other.

"Why does Uncle Aidan look so funny?" asked Haley.

Everyone else laughed.

Christmas dinner went off without a hitch. Caro had worried for nothing. John and Julia were on their best behaviour: They said almost nothing the whole evening. Caro and Melanie talked up a storm, while Aidan and Talia ate, said very little, and looked and smiled at each other, often.

Baker's Dozen

"Hey Wendy. It's Aidan. Got a minute?"

Wendy

Life in the Okanagan Valley was what Wendy had wanted for her son. For herself, it wasn't quite what she'd envisaged when she was younger.

She had the comfort of a home – a real house – and a husband with a good job that kept him happy. She was blessed with a happy, healthy son, Adam, who knew the privilege of a parent-protected youth.

"I won't make the same mistakes my parents did."

Drew, her husband, loved Adam as if he were his own and raised him as such. Wendy did not know who Adam's real father was. She suspected it might have been someone named Owen – she wasn't 100% sure. Some of her friends had told her it was him since they'd been seen going off together at a house party two months or so before high-school graduation.

Her parents took notice of her change in appearance. That's when the problems started. Wendy was the last of three children and, by her parents' estimation, an accident. Her mother, Hannah, loved her as she did her other two children. But her father, George, didn't care for her at all. He appeared embarrassed by her existence. Perhaps she was a reminder of an earlier time for him; when he and his now-wife became parents way ahead of schedule. Hannah was noticeably shocked but understood all the same; she was only 16 when she had become pregnant with Wendy's oldest sister. However, George was not amused and acted the royal prick in the face of becoming an accidental grandfather, waiting til Adam was six months old until her father disowned Wendy and kicked her out of the house.

"If you ever accidentally get someone pregnant, I will never abandon you."

She looked at Adam putting together a puzzle.

Upon getting married to Drew, Wendy decided to be the stay-at-home mom, at least until Adam was old enough to be responsible with a house key. This way, she thought, she could make sure Adam had the proper care and encouragement she thought every child should have from their parents, and not like what she got from her parents.

"What a silly proposition. People bring new lives into the world and then shirk from their responsibilities and deny their kids even exist. What's the point of it all? Why even talk about having kids?"

A dark thought came over Wendy's philosophizing. She figured that she was going to have to go back to work somewhere, doing something, of what she wasn't sure yet, but she'd have to plan something before too long. She wondered about still being a stay-at-home mom once Adam went latch-key. She had the unpleasant thought of being cooped up in a house all of her young adult life, never being able to fully explore life outside. Yet, what kept her there was a determination to see Adam grow up properly, free of the dysfunctions of her own youth.

"Tough job, but them's the cards I was dealt. I have to play them as best as I can."

The thought of calling her parents had crossed her mind many times. Every time, she nixed that idea. They'd given up on her years ago. She wondered what it must be like for them not to know one of their grandchildren.

"It's like I don't exist anymore. Strange, but in that sense, I no longer have any parents. Drew and I haven't had any kids ourselves: Drew is like a father to Adam but isn't his real father. I'm the only known bio-parent that Adam has. In my own little world, I am the start of humanity. I decide right or wrong. He's my special little guy – mine, at least until he leaves home."

She broke from her near-miss with megalomania when it occurred to her once more just how enclosed her little world was. In getting married and choosing to be a full-time mom for the time being, she'd given up on both personal independence and the life of a single mom in favour of relative comfort and the struggle to have anything resembling a social life. She hadn't talked to any of her friends since after her wedding almost four years ago. Most of her current friends were in fact Drew's friends.

"If ever Drew and I divorced, I'd probably be without friends. Isolated, too. Sticky situation."

She'd been out of touch with her old friends for so long that she no longer knew where to find any of them. She wondered where they were and what they were doing with their lives.

"Grad reunion is over a year away. I guess I'll find out then... if I choose to go."

Wendy was having second thoughts about this, thinking that sometimes the past was best left in the past.

"On the other hand, it might be fun."

Wendy was getting a little tired of being referred to by some as a "saved sinner". She attended church with her family every Sunday. At least there she knew community. Her house wasn't in a small town, but in some ways, the church she went to was like a village, with everyone knowing everyone else's business. There were dangers to that. Giving out too many details about yourself was never a good thing, nor was saying little about yourself. Either way could leave things open to wide speculation. It was bad enough that fellow church-goers made any to-do out of Adam being born out of wedlock – *"People still care about that?"* Wendy wondered – but she didn't wish to give them any more to make a big deal out of.

"They're lovely people, but don't they have anything better to do with their lives?"

She felt like a hypocrite for going to church, even if it was for her family. She did believe in a higher power, but the issue was religion. She'd never warmed to it. Her dad may have been religious, but her mom was not. In fact, her mom's side, the McGregors, weren't terribly religious at all. In the days before Confederation, that part of her family was known to be anti-clerical. For that matter, they were also anti-Family Compact. They were Clear Grits back then. One could be forgiven for thinking that those ancestors went to church more out of social obligation than anything else. Once, and this was according to a distant relative, someone even accused her great-great-grandfather of being a Freemason. Once Wendy learned a few things about Freemasonry, she wasn't about to relay any of that to anyone at her church.

"My God. They'd have a meltdown over that, for sure."

She figured on telling Adam about his ancestry one day, when he was ready and interested. That was important: Interest. She began to wonder how a parent can possibly interest a kid in family history. There was a time when this was important, when anyone knew who their forebears were, going back 10 generations. Now, most people would be lucky if they could remember the name of even one great-grandparent.

"Some don't even know their grandparents. Like Adam."

Wendy felt lucky to have met her great-grandmother Maggie in Saskatchewan two years ago. Her husband suggested they go visit her before it was too late. Maggie had been happy to meet two other McGregor descendants – Wendy brought Adam along. Wendy asked all sorts of questions while Adam played with his toys. Maggie was all too happy to answer them. Maggie had questions of her own for Wendy and wasn't too pleased to hear that Wendy's father had kicked her out just for being pregnant.

"Sounds like a goddamned brute", said Maggie.

Drew laughed at that. He couldn't help but agree, saying he'd never do that to his kid.

Maggie had made mention that her health wasn't as good as it used to be. That's when Wendy decided she'd be more like Maggie and remember everything about her family. She set out to learn as much as she could.

Back in her home, the radio played music, briefly going to the news, where the announcer spoke of increasing concern over tobacco companies sponsoring major events, about which Wendy also became concerned. Wendy went about doing the housework and thought about Maggie. She decided she was one day going to tell Adam everything she knew about her family. She knew that he'd ask her yet again who his real father was. When Wendy got married, Adam was only four years old but he knew early on that Drew wasn't his real daddy.

Before finding out she was pregnant, Wendy's boyfriend of two years had dumped her for another, and she'd figured, "Fuck it. I'll sleep with whoever I want." She'd narrowed it down to three possibilities, but without a DNA test, nothing could be confirmed.

"Perhaps it's for the best. None of those possibilities ever tried to claim fatherhood on him."

Later on, Wendy drove the family SUV into town to do her weekly grocery run. The grocery list hardly ever changed.

"Once, when we found out that Adam had a peanut allergy. Sometimes change is good."

Once at the supermarket, she ran into the same people as she had the week before, and the week before that. This, too, varied little. There was the usual small talk of hi, how are you, how are the kids, who started ski-school or sports-camp this week, how are the kids doing in school, and which things were said about whom – a little like the gossip and chatter of the market places of old, back when market places involved the masses rather than select groups of suit-and-tie types in faraway offices telling everyone what they wanted. Wendy took care to listen more than talk. When she did talk, there too was she careful. This routine was predictable yet nominally comfortable. Nothing unexpected. No surprises. She figured it would one day be enough to bore her restless.

She felt quite out of touch with all that she'd known of her lives back in Hatzquiam and Vancouver. Practicality dictated that she should concentrate on the here and now, particularly where her son's future was concerned. But she knew that her past would one day be important to him. There were enough missing pieces from the familial puzzle to give her cause for concern.

The weather couldn't be better for spending time in the yard. The last bits of winter had disappeared. Cool breezes nicely complemented increasing temperatures.

"Summer will be here soon enough. Hopefully no fires this year."

It was time to get some things in order.

Yard work could be a pain in the rump at times, especially considering that said yard was on a small slope. It was a nice yard to maintain, one with lake-front access and a small guesthouse in it. The guesthouse was a modest, one-storey affair a little ways down from the main house, with beds up in its loft as well as a toilet, shower, and sink on the main floor. It also served as a complement to the lake-front, for anyone wishing to shower after having swum in the lake. All of this had to be maintained, too. They never knew when they'd have visitors, and people did visit, especially in the summer. Wendy once joked to Drew about renting the guest-house out, only to have Drew kill the humour by saying that they'd have to install a kitchenette, as he didn't want unfamiliar guests having free access to the main house via its kitchen. Family and friends were alright, but not strangers.

She entered the guest house and looked around to see if things were in order, if things worked. Like the grocery run, she did this once a week. It was part of her routine.

"Better than living in a dirty apartment with 10 people, none of them knowing what the heck to do and who was responsible for what."

After a 10-minute inspection which included testing the plumbing, everything seemed to be in order.

"No bugs, at least."

Thoughts of her two older sisters came into her head for no apparent reason. She hadn't seen them in years, nor they her. She wasn't sure why neither of them had bothered to contact her; a part of her really didn't care. Did each of them decide to wander off in her own direction and were so busy with life that they couldn't be bothered with her? Had she been left out of the equation? She hadn't really thought of them in a long, long time either. They stopped talking to her after she was kicked out, and they didn't attend her wedding.

"So why think about them now?"

There was a stained-glass object hanging from one of the windows in the guest house. The object in question used to belong to her oldest sister. She loved that object but gave it to Wendy as a graduating gift, having forgotten to buy something for the occasion.

"Mystery solved. Maybe she was afraid of Dad?"

As she was leaving the guest house and locking the door behind her, she heard the phone ring in the main house. She ran to get it.

"Hi, Wendy! It's Aidan. Got a minute?"

Aidan and his sister Melanie had been the only family members to show up at Wendy's wedding almost four years ago. Aidan had already figured out that he didn't really care what others thought of him and decided to travel all the way out from Guelph, Ontario to attend her wedding. They had kept in touch through the years, even while he was studying out of province. His parents didn't like this but he

didn't care. He never liked uncle George anyway. Hannah, he was okay with, but George could eat shit for all Aidan cared. So Wendy and Aidan were on good terms with each other at all times. They had also attended the same school at the same time. Her wedding was kind of a mini-reunion for certain people from their high school grad class.

"I'd hoped to hear from you once you got back. All the same, how have you been?" asked Wendy.

"Been busy, which is why it's taken so long to get back to you," said Aidan.

"Happens. So, what's up? Not getting married are you?"

"Well, soon."

"Spit it out, Mr. Coy."

"You must've gotten my message from a while back."

"Sure did. Sad to hear about Maggie. But it was wonderful to hear your voice again."

"Yours too, even if it was only via message machine. And do you remember ever saying how I should come up for a visit?"

"Yup!"

"We'd like to take you up on that, if it's alright."

"Sure, when?"

"In another month?"

"No problem. Wait. Hold the phone: 'We'? Who and how many is 'we'?"

"Oh, lessee: Me, Caro, Talia, and Caro's three kids. So six? We can stay at a nearby hotel, if it's too much trouble."

"Woah woah woah, back up a yard or two. Who's Talia?"

"My fiancée."

"Knew it. And no, you can stay in the guest house and/or the spare room. So, why am I seeing Caro for the first time since ever?"

"Because she wanted to see you and doesn't care what my parents think? Satisfactory?"

"Hell, yeah. How old are Caro's kids?"

"The boy's four and the girl's three. The baby girl's six months now."

"Cute. I look forward to tickling them."

"They're pretty easy to tickle."

"Heh! So when do you want to come up?"

"Four weekends from now, if that's not too sudden."

"Not a problem. Actually, it'll be good to see all of you again. I don't suppose John and Julia will be coming up, too?"

"Hell no. They don't even know we're coming up to visit. And I don't want them to know."

"I thought you didn't care what they think."

"I don't, but I'd rather not ruin my vacation before it's started. So if it's all the same..."

"Hey, it's not like they ever talk to me anyway."

"Fer sure. Say, I need your mailing address."

"What for?"

"To send you an invitation, though not immediately."

"To...?"

"My eventual wedding sometime next year, probably out in Saskatchewan."

"Whereabouts?"

"McGregor family homestead. That's where we plan to have the wedding, anyway. Maura's got the last word on that."

"Cool! We'll bring the RV, if anyone needs space to stay in."

Aidan's pending visit got Wendy in good spirits. She felt very happy for Aidan and couldn't wait to meet his fiancée. She hoped that it would work out for him this time. She was quite aware of Aidan's romantic history enough to know that Talia was not the ex from Guelph.

In an odd way, she also looked forward to seeing Caro again after all these years. She wondered how much the years and having had kids had changed Caro. She knew from experience that for better or for worse kids were a life-changer.

She thought about how nice it would be for Aidan and Nat to have their wedding at the McGregor farm in Saskatchewan. She felt sad when she recalled Aidan calling her last September about Maggie's passing. She figured that Maggie would've been happy to at least hear about Aidan getting married. From what she could remember, Aidan had never spoken to Maggie about his love life, so it wasn't like Maggie was going to think "*Oh finally*". More like, "*Good to hear he's settlin' down.*"

Talking to Aidan also reminded her of something else: her Grad reunion next year. She quite suddenly became decisive. She intended to go to her Grad reunion. And God help Owen: She was going to have words for him.

Owen , part one

Slowly, quietly, turned the knob. Child's eyes – wide, glassy, blue – peered from the door's crack. Entering, cat-like tread, into her parents' room, bedward, wondering what two grown-ups could be doing under the sheets to cause such motion, she asked:

"Maman? Papa? Que faites-vous?"

From under the sheets, she could hear her mother, Francine, say, "*Sacrem-*". Francine poked her head up from under the covers.

«Marjolaine, leave the room. I will be out in a few minutes.»

Marjolaine slowly backed out of the room, eyes facing the lump on the bed, wondering if this was what the cat was doing under the sheets yesterday.

Francine came out, sat Marjolaine down, and asked, «Marjolaine, do you know from where life comes?»

Montreal, south Saint-Michel neighbourhood. A six-year-old boy came home in a daze.

He had gotten in trouble at school. He didn't listen to his teachers. He didn't hear his father.

"Antoine!" said the father, grabbing the son who was about to walk into his toddler sister. "What is wrong? Are you alright?"

Antoine looked at his father, puzzled. "Papa?"

"Yes?"

"Why am I here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why do I live?"

The father smiled. "You live because your mother and I wanted to have a child."

"No, Papa, I mean, what, ah, reason? My reason. Why do I eggs..."

"Exist?"

"Egg-zist. Why?"

His father sighed. "Now that is a silly question. Leave it for the philosophers."

"Floss...?"

"We will talk about this when you are older."

Head-on collision on Highway 97.

Young man, 15, only survivor.

Suburban Toronto. A 10-year-old girl received a guitar for her birthday from her dad. He'd chosen to leave before she even opened the guitar case. Inside, a birthday card; inside that:

"Good luck in life, kiddo. See you around."

"Hey, Guitar Guy! Play us a tune!"

People at high-school called him that. He loved and hated it at the same time: loved the attention, and hated it when hardly anyone knew or could remember his real name.

Suburban Vancouver. A young woman of 17 had big plans for her own life. Her father thought differently. He didn't care if she approved. An argument, then a slap across the face.

Where once he'd known home was now unknown to him. He decided he needed to be somewhere else. Wandering lost to wanderlust.

"Antoine Béliveau-Picardo", called the moderator of the ceremony.

He walked across the stage to receive his secondary school diploma, and smiling, he accepted it. What the future intended for "Tony", as his friends now called him, he didn't know, but he was determined to go places, to be someone.

Last month's date was quite happy: He was about to become a father. The young woman he'd had non-consensual sex with felt differently.

Her parents, though fairly conservative in their beliefs, saw that their daughter was distressed. They consented to what she'd been taught never to do.

From that point on, romance was never going to be a top priority for her.

She had shed her proper first name some time ago. By the time she finished Secondary IV, she was no longer "Marjolaine". By first-year university, nobody knew her by that name, not even the tall, easy-going, guitar-playing guy she'd made a move on during orientation.

She'd lived with her aunt in Toronto for two years and decided her own parents in BC were no longer a going concern for her. She wanted to go back to school. Toronto was fun while it lasted, but she decided to target Montreal's two English-language universities. She was contented with her decision.

"A whole new adventure there."

Nice dream.

He, at ease, gave flower.

Wrapped, in love,

Around his partner.

Warm.

She made the moves naturally and took to the pole easily. She was very familiar with dance. She'd done ballet and gymnastics when she was younger. She was also quite comfortable in her own skin. The money was good, especially the tips. And she needed that money to get through school. Loans and bursaries only covered so much.

Bad dream.

Pushed into hallway,

Silhouette drove pencil

Into heart.

Warning.

After one year at University of Windsor, she decided she wanted something else, to be somewhere else, in life, away from where she'd grown up, from certain memories, from certain people.

A blind pointing at a map of Canada showed her where she was going to end up.

"You're late."

He smiled. "When am I not late? I was born 10 days late, according to the doctor."

"I've heard this story too many times to count, Owen. It's not ageing very well."

"Yeh, unlike me, eh?"

Chia just rolled her eyes.

"So, the setlist for orientation?"

"Yes, please!" Chia smiled. That was Owen to her: fun-loving, slightly irritating, incorrigible, sometimes all at once; her occasional musical partner-in-crime.

On a St-Denis bar terrasse, Labour Day long weekend Saturday, warmed by noon-sun, under clear blue skies, the occasional relief-giving breeze, was where they schemed, as tourists got in their sightseeing licks before fall set in, couples young and older walked, holding hands, in love, and people window-shopped. A beggar occasionally held out his hand in hopes that some kind stranger would

"spare some change". Cars buzzed by. A man, sans helmet, slalomed quickly through traffic on his motorcycle, his girlfriend at his back – smiling, laughing. Work of any sort shouldn't have been a consideration at this time and place – one could just sit there all afternoon, taking it all in – but, drinks received and first-sipped, Chia and Owen had a student orientation gig to sketch out. Business first.

"So, what delayed you?" asked Chia.

"Course scheduling", said Owen. "Not a huge thing. Something I can do later."

"I'm surprised you haven't already done it. Why now?"

"Why not? No rush. Besides, if I shop around for courses in the first week of classes, by the time I call to register, someone somewhere will have dropped out, and voilà! An opening."

"Pretty risky."

"That's life."

"No argument there."

"Back to the setlist", said Owen. "We'll have to rehearse. We haven't played since, when?"

"In public? Or within our little group?"

The "little group" in question was what they and others called "ABC", something Owen often quipped could stand for "whatever you like". Its numbers constantly in flux, it was hard to tell the size of the group. Save for Owen and Chia, what was once the core of the group had graduated last June, going their own ways thereafter.

"In public."

"Since last orientation. Well, you did say we should do orientation again."

"I did?"

"Yup."

"When?"

"After last year's orientation?"

"Shit. Yeah, I did, didn't I?"

"Uh-huh."

Owen winced at the prospect. He felt things had to be better this year. Last year, all but their band booked out when the student union's financial woes became public. The SU managed to bring in a duo at the last minute. Owen wasn't really impressed by them. He felt their political material could've been better expressed as slam poetry rather than in song. When it was Chia and Owen's turn to play, they accidentally upstaged the previous group, wowing the crowd but displeasing the SU types. After the show, there were bad reactions all around when Owen brought up the as-promised free food and drinks.

"Okay. What do we play?" asked Owen.

"Same as last year, plus anything new to either of us since then."

"We'll need to rehearse."

"Haven't you already said that?"

"Yes, but I know how much you love the sound of my voice."

"Only when singing."

"Especially anything new."

"Especially."

Lowlife's student café was just the place for Owen to think about how things had gone at orientation the previous day and how it could've been better.

This year's SU representative said there'd definitely be beverages and food for them. Owen had put on his best Billy Bragg/Robyn Hitchcock and acted more the stage ham than the rock star, playing his acoustic and charming the crowd.

"Too bad dad and mam aren't around to hear how it sounds now. I must've replaced all the strings at least a dozen times", thought Owen of the guitar he'd had since his tenth birthday. He had it wired for amplified sets. At home, he had the real electric deal – a Gibson Explorer – which he'd gotten off an ex-landlord who'd confiscated it from a tenant who'd done a midnight move but had forgotten his guitar. Owen played that mainly at parties.

Chia and Owen had been in a band while in Cégep, answering a posting which stood out from the usual clutter of used-textbooks-for-sale and trips-to-New-York adverts, some of them out of date. Cégep ended, and so did the band. Owen flew solo for a while, but he and Chia reunited in first-year at university due to Owen's perpetual roommate, Marc.

Back together, they talked, went places, and even broached the subject of dating once more. After the laughter subsided, they recalled how they loved making music together and formed *Oh Gee*. Owen thought them a tongue-in-cheek duo – Chia didn't quite agree. The chemistry between them was great. Chia liked Joni Mitchell and Ani DiFranco. Their sets were usually 50/50, with each usually backing the other. Chia sometimes played bass, and Owen sometimes brought out a tin whistle or a bodhran. The musical mix was never boring.

"The whole set went better than last year."

Outside the café, he noticed the Public Action Group still at it. PAG had been trying to "Green the Street" off and on since 1989. Concordia's downtown campus, surrounded by the city's trappings, was not traditional.

"No separate, walled-off campus grounds here, not like the neighbours down the street."

In the past, PAG had gotten blue moon support from the SU. Owen looked at the street for what it might become.

"It all depends who's in power at the SU. It changes hands yearly, so support for 'the Green' comes and goes. And when it goes, it's back to square one for PAG. Tragic but true. But that's student politics."

Among his current gang at university, Owen wasn't the expert on the subject of student politics and activism. That was Tony. He was a SU Vice-President last year. Also on his three-year CV: President of the Economics students; a two-term member on Arts & Science Faculty Council; and student rep on the university senate. When he wasn't doing that, he served on CSU council. If anything went on at Con U, Tony knew about it. Not long ago, Tony got pissed off at the current SU Prez for backing out on her promise to support "the Green" but figured she would backtrack again by Christmas. That was last June, which was about when Owen had last heard from Tony.

Owen figured Tony was spending time with his fiancée, Debbie. Deb was part of a sorority, a student living in residence, a psychology major with a penchant for arts journalism, and an admirer of Karen Kain and Audrey Hepburn. She was also good at acting. When Owen saw her last June, he thought she was doing a good job acting the airhead. While in residence, she'd been roommates with one of Owen's exes, Alexandra – Alexa to her friends – who said she'd always had intelligent conversations with Debbie. However, Alexa conceded that since Deb & Tony got engaged, Deb hadn't been "herself".

"And the engagement hasn't been a too stable one. It's been a year now and already they've called it off at least three times, no thanks to one of Tony's old gang. I think. I've lost count. But the last time I looked, they were back together again. It's starting to give me a headache. Tony's asked me to be one of his ushers. I agreed, and I'm all prepared for it, but only if they go through with it. I'm betting they will. Alexa says it won't happen."

Tony did manage to convince Owen to serve on the English department council as a student representative for a year. Owen thought it educational though not enticing enough for him to have another go around. Owen preferred to give the occasional campus tour during university orientation, for he knew it well. But music was more his thing, and he liked storytelling and bull sessions. He'd found like minds with ABC. Now that most of them had graduated, he missed them more and more.

Others, too many for him to recall all at once, had come and gone from his school life, some too early on, others in passing last year. Good times. Nostalgia aside, he was fairly satisfied with his current lot, stragglers all from different groups who'd come together in this their last year.

Lyne came into the café and looked around. Clear blue eyes took in whatever had changed since her last visit in April: any change in menu, new artwork on the wall, new drapes in the corner to make it look like a private section, any new faces. All this took about 10 seconds, but it felt like eight months to her before she made eye contact with Owen. Eight months had been the length of their relationship.

She hadn't seen Owen since last July and it felt like longer than that. She and Owen had been practically inseparable since the first day they met at orientation two years prior. She missed him

terribly whenever they said "later". She would never let him know that, although she always got the impression that he was aware of this.

Owen had seen Lyne enter the café and looked at her as she looked around, probably aware that she was being watched. He wondered what she could be looking at since there was nothing really new here. He concluded that she was revisiting old memories. Perhaps.

He could not imagine his life without her, but she usually deflected comments of that sort, so he never told her. What he did tell her was that he hoped they'd be playing cribbage into old age. She responded that he'd never win. They laughed.

«Hi, dear», said Lyne in French, giving Owen the usual double-buss greeting. «How's it going?»

"Pretty good, Petite," said Owen, responding in English. "Petite" was his nickname for Lyne – only Owen was allowed get away with that. "How was yer summer?"

"Oh, good, lack of a stable job aside."

"Yeah? Annythin' else?"

"You remember that guy I met in one of my Bio labs last year?"

"Weren't there a number of them?" said Owen, all smarmy and sipping his coffee.

«Silly», she mumbled. "More specifically, I'm seeing Will."

Owen almost did a spit-take but halted over the clean-up being a bitch. He marvelled at how such a pairing could happen. Lyne was hi-IQ and outgoing, while Will was a bit of a social introvert though one with an overall GPA that spoke "4.3" from top to bottom

"We've been seeing each other since last May," she continued, only a little nonplussed by Owen's reaction, "but he's still kinda shy. His parents don't even know about us yet."

"Oh?"

"Well, his mother's a rich WASP."

"Oh?"

"She's also a bigot."

"Oh?"

She paused for a few seconds and stared at Owen a little blankly before saying: "Oh! Oh! Oh! Are you having an orgasm or what?"

Owen looked at Lyne curiously, then pursed his lips in an effort not to laugh, to no avail.

"Anyway", she continued, smiling, "the bitch is trying to make a proper white boy out of him."

"Sounds like she's livin' in the wrong century. Prob'bly thinks tha Crystol Palace is still standin', wot? Still using words like 'scoff-law' and 'live-in girlfriend'. An' in all hearsay, thinks Moun'ain Street was named for some toffy-nosed priest from another countray?" said Owen, faking a cockney accent.

Lyne wasn't partial to urban legends any more than she was to revisionist history but still found Owen's comments funny. Also, being at an anglophone university, she'd always had this desire not to rock boats. She laughed all the same.

"So? How did your first class go?"

"Well, it was a long trek from my place to here. And half the bloody escalators were out of order again."

"Without the long intro, please."

"Well, first class was supposed to be a TBA."

"Oh, yeah. That. Isn't that the prof who teaches all sorts of courses in every department, sometimes more than one course at the same time?"

Owen laughed. "Pretty much."

"So who was it for real?"

Owen smiled, his mouth open. "Professor Stanley."

Lyne looked wide-eyed, exasperated. "Oh god. Your department loves to play mean jokes on people, do they not? Wasn't that...?"

"Yeah, the prof I was trying to avoid, but I could've only dodged that bullet for so long. I need an American Lit course to graduate from the Honours programme. That's usually his turfdom."

"I've heard that a regular prof can get listed as 'To Be Announced' when nobody knows if he or she can teach a full course-load. Is there another American Lit course you could take?"

"Sure, but it's another TBA. They should re-label it 'TYC': 'Take Your Chances'. Not sure I want to encounter Ol' Windy in another class."

Lyne laughed a little. Owen always had clever nicknames for people. "Why 'Old Windy'?"

"Well, I came in late. Ten minutes. I did mention that half the escalators were out of order, right?"

"Yes, in your very short intro."

"Right. So he saw me come in late, and he started lecturing the class on the evils of tardiness or some rot. After that, he just paced in front of the class, back-and-forth like, exasperated, head in hands or looking up at the ceiling, constantly sighing."

Lyne smiled widely, eyebrows arched high.

"And it didn't end there. Oh no. After about five minutes, another student came in late and Old Windy started all over again."

"And you dropped that course, right?"

"And substituted it, too. Did it first thing after class. Isn't telephone registration amazing? And all from the SU phones, too."

"I'm surprised you found an SU phone that was working."

"Yeah, me too. Given the state those things are in, I'm surprised I didn't dial Abu Dhabi by accident."

"Hee hee."

"What?"

"You should write a song about him."

"Yeh, and I'd call it 'The Ballad of Old Windy'."

They both laughed.

"So, did you see orientation outside?" asked Owen.

"I saw you and Chia on stage. I also saw you 'dedicating' a song to Margo. 'No Regrets, Dear'? Kinda singled her out, didn't you?"

'Margo' was one of Owen's exes. She was from an animal-rights group which had been guilt-tripping people who'd lined up to hit piñatas. When Owen ran into her yesterday, she'd been handing out leaflets on what piñatas represent and how people shouldn't participate in this activity.

"Yup. Did you see her middle-fingering me before that?" asked Owen.

"No. What did you do to piss her off this time?" Lyne said, practically rolling her eyes.

"Whacked a piñata."

Lyne smiled, stifling a laugh. "How did it go?"

"Got it in one", said Owen, smiling a wry smile. "Well, in all fairness, I'd intended to whack the bejaysus out of it, but it's not my fault that it was poorly put together."

Lyne laughed. "Good. I never liked her anyway."

Owen smiled. "So? Annything else good at orientation?"

"Oh, it's always a carnival", said Lyne. "I kinda like it. I never know what will be there from one year to the next."

"Sounds about right."

"Did you apply for any credit cards this year?"

"Of course."

"Aren't you worried about going into more debt?"

"No fear of that. They always turn me down. Did you pick up any freebies?"

"Oh yeah, cuz I like the idea of helping major companies that sell products made in some sweatshop faraway", she said, sarcastically.

Owen laughed a little.

"Especially if it's cosmetics and they've tested it on cute little bunny rabbits", she continued, almost sneering, her voice rising to childlike levels. Owen smiled knowing that Lyne didn't like animal abuse in any form.

"The stuff that costs so little but makes you look like a million bucks and just in time for your 15 minutes of fame?" asked Owen. "I hear the lipstick they're hawking makes a great graffiti marker."

"I wouldn't know. Maybe try them on washroom ads?"

Owen thought about how much he didn't like washroom ads. These were the ones which were posted over stand-up urinals and on the inside of cabin doors, trying and failing to convince people that they need a new car, and all while doing their business in the privy.

"Might make for some improvements", said Owen. "I mean, the cheek of them!"

Lyne laughed. She looked at her watch. "Oop. Gotta go meet someone before class."

"What's yer next class, Petite?"

"Modern Drama."

"Hey, same as me."

"With Professor Roberts?"

"Yup. Last course and it's finished. Yer Minor in English Lit is pret'near done."

"Oh, yeah. Just this six-credit course and I'm finished that minor. Gotta go. By-ee." Lyne smiled and waved, dropping one finger after the next.

Owen smiled and nodded as she left. He had some free time before class and decided to rewrite an article for the English Department's student-run newsletter. Looking at it again, he marvelled that his prose, never his strong suit, had improved. Writing lyrics and setting them to music, which wasn't as easy as it sounded, was more his thing. He added another paragraph, edited it for content, and then read it again to himself:

"Every year, departments all across Con U come out with their own little booklets, telling who will teach what course. Sometimes, you'll see the reading list, too.

These are more helpful than the course registration books they make available after each new year. The Registrar's Office needs all info by October of the previous academic year. Two years ago, they only needed it by January. Then, last year it was by December. They seem to need it earlier every year. At the rate things are going, departments will have to submit info two years in advance. Why so far off? One can only guess. It probably has nothing to do with opaque bureaucratic practices, but I digress.

One added benefit of these booklets? One can finally discover who is the mysterious Professor TBA. Y'know? The one that appears in the course schedule book? Professor TBA is indeed quite an interesting person. And talented, oh yes, quite so. TBA is a super-human who can teach many courses, many sections, and many different subjects, most at the same time. Whereas the average prof will teach 12-18 creds per Fall/Winter session, TBA teaches a credit load easily exceeding 120 credits. And, even better, TBA teaches a little more than 60% of the courses offered at Con U in any one given year.

By trial and error, not to mention word of mouth, you'll find that TBA is, more often than not, really a part-time prof, and many of them, in fact.

Relying totally on info provided by these little booklets makes a compelling case for not registering so far in advance and instead choosing last minute to shop around for courses. As risky a proposition as that sounds, it may very well be the only realistic one."

Owen thought what he'd written was dogshit but decided it was good enough for newbs clued out as to course registration ins-and-outs. Owen realized that the paragraph about TBAs wasn't 100% true, but his recent conversation with Lyne had inspired him to finish it anyway. He felt that write-ups like this were to be less common in the coming years – Pine System chatter would see to that.

She saw Owen sitting there, locked in eye combat with a sheet of paper. She was tempted to yank that piece of paper out of his hand and make him chase after it. Instead, she opted for a more humane approach.

"Hi, Dopey."

"Ever the bastion of compassion, eh Lex?"

Life had been difficult for Alexa. When she was a pre-teen, her parents decided to join some so-called Christian cult, though Alexa was never sure that these people were truly Christian at all. Many of them, her parents included, made her feel less than nothing. Alexa was never sure she deserved any compliments. Sometimes, things were worse than that at home. She finished high-school, left home without saying goodbye, stayed with her aunt, travelled a little, wrote about her experiences, and eventually wound up at Concordia. Alexa was one of Owen's rebounds post-Lyne and she learned

about it post-break-up. Even though she didn't appreciate it much, she still maintained good relations with Owen. A part of her was still in love with him.

"Like, sheeyah, as if", she said, laughing after that. "So, how's it going?"

"Fine. How was summer?"

"Not too bad. I was hired as a temp in an office. Boring as hell. Still, bills to pay."

"How's Irene?"

"Aunt Irene? She's OK. I saw her for two weeks. She had to go in for an operation. An appendectomy. Routine stuff... for the doctor. And you know how much she hates doctors. They'll both live."

Owen laughed. "So, a pretty uneventful summer, all told?"

"Yeah. Coming back from Toronto was a different story though."

"How so?"

"Well, you knew that Lyne and Mirka had moved out, right?"

"Yeah."

"And Lyne was left in charge of finding replacement roomies?"

"She hadn't mentioned that, but then we hadn't kept much in touch with each other over the summer. I saw her during the Jazz Festival in July. Otherwise, up in Jonquière picking blueberries for half the summer."

"Oh, exciting. Well, to make a long story even longer, I came back from Toronto two days ago to find two new roomies. Lyne left a note, saying she had a good feeling about them."

"So your little domestic world got turned upside down?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"What are they like?"

"One's from Windsor. Not very social. Theatre student. Likes Leonard Cohen, Blue Rodeo, and Depeche Mode."

"Hmm. I like her already."

"You should hear the other one – it's possible you've met her already. Yesterday, I heard EVOL coming from her room."

"Sonic Youth?" said Owen, smiling and curious. "I like both of them now."

She gave Owen a knitted-brow weird type of smile and nodded. "After that, it was L7, the Lunachicks, the Pixies, and then Helmet." She screwed up her face again. "I think. And then that's when she noticed I existed."

"And that's when you think you two hit it off, right?"

"Yeah, I do think so. Well, musically, at least. Otherwise, she came across as, like – I dunno – ultra-mega-hyperactive? So I think it'll take a while before I get up to her speed."

"How does the Windsor-roomie feel about her?"

"Actually, they hit it off quite well. They kinda balance one another?"

"My, aren't you the psychologist today?"

"Speaking of psychologists", she cocked her head towards the door, "Debbie."

"Is Tony in tow?"

"Didn't you hear?"

"They broke up again", said Owen, not surprised.

"How did you guess?"

"Got lucky", Owen said, rolling his eyes.

"What's with the eyes?" asked Debbie, seeing the look on Owen's face.

"Oh, just looking into my brain", Owen answered.

"Yeah, Owen does that quite a bit", Alexa joked.

"Must be painful", said Debbie, her big green eyes looking dolefully at Owen.

"So will I still be one of Tonio's ushers?" asked Owen, feigning ignorance.

Debbie sighed. "No. Don't bother renting a tux. The wedding is off", she said matter-of-factly.

Owen nodded and slowly turned to Alexa, oddly smiling. "When the hell are you two gonna get off the fence? Seriously: Off, on, off, on, off again. Flippin' light switch."

Debbie laughed. "Light switch? That's funny. Well, anyway, there's no point complaining. It's my life, so I'll do what I want."

"Okay, fine. Fair point. Me too: I'd love to do what I want, but that generally doesn't include visiting on a semi-regular basis the suit-man, who, by the way, now knows me on a first-name basis."

"So? Why not just change suit places?" asked Debbie.

Owen sighed, exasperated. He knew she was right: It was her choice, and nobody else. Still, it frustrated him.

"That may be solvin' the wrong problem, don'tcha think?" he continued. "Well, whatever. Your life. Anyway, I hafta go to class and pretend to pay attention to what the prof is saying."

"Oh", said Debbie, "do you have ADD?"

"Something like that", said Owen, wincing and gathering up his stuff to go to class.

"H 437. H 437. H 437. Where the HELL is H 437? Could the 'H' possibly stand for 'HELL'? It'd be nice if someone gave proper attention to numbering these rooms. Or at least replacing the signs once in a while, especially the ones which have fallen off or disappeared."

Owen felt thankful that his university's out-front sign didn't have moveable letters for some naughty sort to move around.

Class was about to start. He was in time. He didn't fear not getting a seat at all and having to stand by the wall at the back or even the window for lack of a chair. He knew that this wasn't a problem at his university, where class sizes were smaller than most other universities, especially those with lecture halls that held 1,000+ students who had no hope in ever having their raised hands seen, let alone their questions answered. Such class sizes were an alien concept here. Owen was in his element.

He looked around for Lyne and spotted her sitting near Tony: The Tony.

"How's it goin', Owen?" asked Tony, joking slightly.

"Going to sit down, that's how, El Tonio", said Owen, taking a seat behind those two but near a woman who seemed to be following their conversation and smiled at Owen's last few words.

Owen had seen her face around whenever he sang, played, and composed music on the spot on warm, sunny days out at west-end Loyola Campus. Whenever he did this, he tended to attract people. He never really took into account the size of the audience, nor did he bother to ask names: He rarely paused for more than five seconds between songs. Back in high-school, he used to play between lunch and first-afternoon class, putting names to faces and never forgetting a one. He reckoned that he stopped wanting to remember people's names when he realized that few people could remember his.

"Hey, Opie", said Lyne, lightly knocking Owen's head and then pointing to the woman Owen was sitting near, "this is Carina."

There was an awkward silence. Owen expected Carina to say something. Carina felt the same way, expecting Owen to pick up the conversation.

"I'm, er, Owen", he said.

"Well, you know my name already, so I won't repeat it", she said. Inexplicably, she imagined her taking a flower offered by him.

Owen couldn't help but stare into Carina's dark eyes and mentally note how lovely and sweet to his ears her voice was.

"Hey, Opie", whispered Lyne, pointing to the prof entering the room, "entr'acte's over. Showtime!"

"So far, so good", thought Owen, as the prof introduced himself to the class. *"He hasn't gone into conniptions yet."*

"Please have a seat", the prof said, noticing a late arrival and wanting to make this person feel right at home. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes."

"Settle in, folks", muttered Tony. "S'going to be a long one."

"Sorry?" asked the prof. "Is there something you want to share with the class?"

"Just clearing my throat, Sir", said Tony.

The prof continued to speak about the course and what he expected of his students but didn't pick up exactly where he left off. Instead, he backtracked a bit. Unfortunately, since this was the first week of classes, there were bound to be a number of strays still clued out as to the location of their

classroom. Every time this happened, the Prof stopped his spiel to welcome these beings from another world, where time flowed differently, subsequently backtracking on his course intro. To make matters worse, his enthusiasm seemed to be slipping away, his voice increasingly monotone.

At this point, Owen noticed Tony starting to nod off. Owen took it upon himself to nudge Sleeping Bull out of his stream of unconsciousness. Rousing himself, Tony nodded to Owen and waved a little in appreciation. Owen started to imagine the prof in a sci-fi spaceship scenario that went badly for the rest of the crew, with sensors malfunctioning, engines inoperative, and the ship set hopelessly adrift in space.

"One thing I'd like to emphasize about this cours", said the prof, causing Owen to shake off his odd little daydream, "is that I expect that all of you know how to write well in English. If you have problems with your writing skills, you may wish to drop this course in favour of a composition class."

"Sensors functioning again", thought Owen. "That's probably one of the few salient things he's said in this entire intro lecture. I mean, by and large, the profs here try to discourage the proliferation of what they call 'creative spellers' (i.e., those who can't spell) – not to be confused with those enrolled in a creative writing course or program. No. While in university, one must write primly and properly. If one wishes to excel in creative spelling or even create meaningless words, then that's for Marketing class."

Lyne looked at a copy of the syllabus the prof had started passing around some ten minutes earlier. She appeared okay with it until she got to the part where he mentioned what books he wanted his students to get and where to get them, which was a store where the prices weren't cheap, most likely a store run by one of his friends.

"Sir?" The prof looked around and acknowledged Lyne's presence within five seconds. "I'm someone waiting for a student loan. Do we have to buy these specific editions and at this particular place?"

"Yes", said the prof.

"Why's that, if I may ask?" chimed in Owen.

"It's simple. If I cite a certain page and paragraph, then people won't have a problem locating it", said the prof.

"True, but you can't buy books without money", said Tony.

"Then you should ask your parents to give you the money. Next question?"

"Well, I'm afraid they're wholly unable t'do that at the moment", Owen interrupted, all too tersely, not wishing to say more than that to a bunch of people he didn't know. Lyne and Tony knew exactly why. "Sir."

"Well, perhaps one of your classmates would be good enough to help out by sharing with you until your loan comes in", said the prof.

Owen nodded in resignation. He knew the prof wasn't telling the whole story. He knew by experience that there were ways around this. The year before, while in the university bookstore, Owen had to pick up a literary anthology for an English class. He saw one copy which had a lower price on it: same anthology, same company, same edition, same size. He took it to the counter where the cashier asked to see his ID. Upon seeing that he was a student, she told him that he was only eligible to buy a student copy. When he asked why not this one, she told him it was an "Instructor's Copy" and that he wasn't a prof. He informed her that he was tutoring a student at an advanced level and then showed her his certificate qualifying him as a tutor of English. So, she let him walk with his instructor's copy, costing him only \$25 for a book that would've normally set him back \$60. She hadn't bothered to scrutinize his certificate enough to see that the name on his ID didn't match. "Ovide Prévérault", one of Owen's colleagues, was a French tutor.

"So much for bilingualism", Owen thought. "But it serves them right for selling students the higher-priced editions when there's no real diff between the 'Instructor's Copy' and the 'Student's Copy'. I mean, why does the 'Instructor's Copy' cost less than the 'Student's Copy'? Students obviously earn far less than profs. One thing's for sure: There'll be a pissed off prof somewhere."

What almost pissed Tony off but not quite was how this prof somehow managed to ramble on and say so little for almost 30 minutes. Beyond a certain point, perhaps 10 minutes into his lecture, Tony felt the prof lost him. For some reason, the prof was never adequately able to make his point,

although, to his credit, he did use that word "point" quite a bit. At the end of class, students walked out, some literally scratching their heads.

Lyne cajoled Owen and Carina into going for coffee afterward. Tony was another matter.

"Na, sorry Lyne. Gotta committee meeting", said Tony.

"What else is new?" muttered Lyne.

Neither Carina nor Owen had ever heard to the place they were going to on Crescent – "Le Cirque" – and neither of them knew what the other didn't know.

One of Lyne's current roommates, Lise, was working the counter, a part-time job while studying at bare-minimum full-time. She qualified for both loans and bursaries but at the same time had another mouth to feed: that of her four-year-old daughter.

While Lyne was in the washroom, Carina, who hadn't really spoken all that much while at the café, said to Owen in a subdued tone: "If you like, we can share my book for class."

Owen looked at her curiously. "Would it be a bother to you?"

"Not really. I mean, it's not like I can lend it out all the time. I kind of need it too, right? But we can always study together."

Owen considered Carina's offer for a few seconds. "Well, it will take a bit of strain off me financially, at least until my next pay-cheque comes in. And the idea of studying together is a nice one."

Carina smiled.

Lyne came back and wondered what had gone on to make these two smile. Before she could ask, Carina decided to change the subject.

"So, Owen", started Carina, "how did you and Tony meet?"

"Through Lyne", said Owen, casually.

"Yeah", said Lyne, "Opie doesn't meet anyone unless I permit it."

Carina laughed a little.

"And how do you and Tony know each other?", asked Owen, "If you don't mind me asking."

Carina shrugged her shoulders and said matter-of-factly, "Oh, I was one of his rebounds."

Lyne chimed in. "So how is my old apartment, Carina?"

"Miles better than living in residence, I assure you", said Carina. "Oh, that place was such a pain. You couldn't study there without someone trying to distract you or drag you out to a party or some rez meeting. I spent more time away from 'home' than in it."

"Which residence were you in?" asked Owen.

"Langley", said Carina. "I have to admit that I was kind of sorry to see it closed down last year, though."

"Yeah, me too", said Owen. "Tony told me that the man responsible for that is an arse when it comes to student space and student life. Well, I must admit, the feeling's mutual: I have no regard for him either. In fact, it was with him in mind that I wrote a eulogy for Langley Hall. Remind me to show it to you some time."

Carina smiled. "Why not now?"

"I don't have it with me. It's in a folder back home."

"Hmm. So bring it when we study."

Lyne looked at Owen and Carina, smiling all the while.

No incoming or outgoing calls. Owen thought this was a good thing.

It was the first time today that things had been quiet for him. He'd had three classes, two coffee sessions, and a later run-in with Debbie in the Loyola residence cafeteria, where his fries and gravy went lukewarm while she complained about life and everything else. He was content to be at home.

He was going through his university email account from remote when a message flashed at the bottom of his little laptop's screen just after 11pm: "*TalkChat requested by ValGirl*".

"What's bothering Alexa now?" thought Owen, recalling the last time they'd communicated by TalkChat.

Owen suggested Alexa adopt the handle *ValGirl* after she'd told him about how she used to act in high-school before her father tried to "smarten her up". She suggested his handle be *Opium*. It stuck.

They lived only three blocks away from each other. Owen began to wonder if communicating via internet was going to become part of a rather bad, anti-social trend in the future.

(Opium)>Hi, A. What's up?

(ValGirl)>Me. Up the wall. Y'd U leave me alone w/ Deb?

(Opium)>She asked the same thing, only substitute 'Deb' 4 'Alexa'. She was starting 2 drive me nuts.

(ValGirl)>How do U think I feel? I lived w/ her for 8 mos.

(Opium)>Poor U.

(ValGirl)>What'd she say 2 U?

(Opium)>Dunno. Nothing, really. Tried convo w/ me. No luck. 2 hungry me. Can't blame her 4 trying.

(ValGirl)>She has her moments. Try talking art.

(Opium)>I'll refer her 2 Glenn.

(ValGirl)>Glenn?

(Opium)>New roomie. Design Art student. Draws comics & stuff.

(ValGirl)>I wouldn't. She's just an art-lover, I think.

(Opium)>Noted. Change subject: U know who Prof Martin is?

(ValGirl)>In 19 C Am Lit?

(Opium)>Yup.

(ValGirl)>Young prof. Interesting lectures. EZ marker, but not 2 EZ. Nice person. Why?

(Opium)>Registered 4 it yesterday. Got it TM.

(ValGirl)>I thought U were in Stalin's class?

(Opium)>Ha ha. Got out. No for windy lectures in the non-educational sense, if U know what I mean.

(ValGirl)>Ha ha. OK, but that's 6 creds, & 19 C is only 3. What else?

(Opium)>Modern American.

(ValGirl)>Which section?

(Opium)>Thursday evening.

(ValGirl)>Ha ha. U know who's teaching it?

(Opium)>U mean other than TBA?

(ValGirl)>The Flying Scotsman.

(Opium)>Prof Mackie?

(ValGirl)>Yeah.

(Opium)>Cool. Another Q, diff topic: Carina?

(ValGirl)>What about her?

(Opium)>I met her 2day in Prof Roberts' class.

(ValGirl)>What's he "teaching" this year?

(Opium)>Modern Drama.

(ValGirl)>HH usually teaches it but he's on 6-mo sabbatical. Winter semester courses only.

(Opium)>So I coulda had Con U's "actor-in-rez", instead of man-who-acts-like-he-teaches? What bad timing.

(ValGirl)>Yeah. So Carina & Lyne R sharing your misery, right?

(Opium)>And El Tonio.

(ValGirl)>So, what happened?

(Opium)>Went 4 a cuppa after. Talked about life, the university, & everything.

(ValGirl)>U & Carina.

(Opium)>& Lyne. Will came by later.

(ValGirl)>Who's Will?

(Opium)>Lyne's new beau.

(ValGirl)>OK. So what about C?

(Opium)>Is she sincere?

(ValGirl)>Haven't known her 2 long. Can't say.

(Opium)>K. Thanx. Sides from Deb, how's life?

(ValGirl)>Mom called. Dad's got cancer. Says he wishes I were near him.
 (Opium)>So's to get w/i swinging distance of him?
 (ValGirl)>Ha ha. Thinking the same thing.
 (Opium)>What're U gonna do?
 (ValGirl)>Stay here. Have school & life. Can't B bothered. He's a stupid fuck. Never change.
 Took 2 much from me. U know the story.
 (Opium)>Yup & that's a parcel I ain't handling or opening.
 (ValGirl)>Better not.
 (Opium)>Defensive?
 (ValGirl)>As usual.
 (Opium)>Your life.
 (ValGirl)>Thanx. Gotta log off. Later?
 (Opium)>Course. Bye.
 (ValGirl)>Bye.

Owen's comments bothered her, making references to Alexa's father's past behaviour, although she felt she had to assume some responsibility for having brought up the bothersome subject of her father in the first place. Being far away from where the action had once taken place, Alexa felt a certain sense of security, one which left her, to paraphrase Owen, well out of swinging distance of her father. Those memories of her father were not fond ones.

The current state of her father did leave her feeling a tad perturbed. She once loved him and looked up to him. Later on, he tried to beat those pleasant times out of her. She felt love towards the man she once knew but also rage over who he had become. On a rational level, she knew his death would resolve nothing if he had no remorse for what he'd done.

"Chances of that happening: zero to nil."

After a particularly bad incident with her father, she spent lots of time in the local public library and read almost every book there. Sometimes she hung around with skateboarders at a local park, eventually learning how to use a skateboard. She missed home-cooked meals, time with her younger sister Audrey, and a good night's sleep, all so she didn't have to be near her father. She'd only done this for a month until she graduated from high-school. Her parents had arranged for Alexa to spend the summer at a Southern Baptist College in the states, not bothering to ask her opinion on the matter. And after that, marriage.

On her way to going south, Alexa laid over in Toronto. Once there, she called her Aunt Irene to come and pick her up, not telling her how long the layover was. Recently divorced, and with no children of her own, her aunt welcomed this visit.

It suddenly dawned on Irene that Alexa had been there for six hours and never stated when her connecting flight was. Irene was about to call the airport to see about other connecting flights, Alexa then told her even more about the problems at home. Irene was sympathetic and said she could stay with her.

Alexa's dad heard that she hadn't arrived at her destination, he had a fire & brimstone fit. He didn't think it was the concern of the authorities that his child was "missing", and so was at a loss as to where she could've ended up. A part of him didn't care, just as long as she eventually ended up where he'd sent her. It was a while before it dawned on him that she could be in Toronto, but he got confused over who or what could be in Toronto. A call from his pastor to another in Toronto, complete with description, eventually yielded a sighting and then a confrontation, one which involved the local police concerning a potential case of assault against a minor. He asked his wife if she knew anyone in Toronto and she said her youngest sister lived there. A call to Irene saw him order Alexa to come home. Never the fastest on the draw, it didn't occur to him at the time to use the legal system to get her back. Doing so would've seen her sent home quickly. Alexa's 18th birthday was only two months before her high-school graduation, but in BC she was still a minor. At the rate things were going, Alexa felt like her 19th birthday was going to be away from home.

After ranting from the west coast for six months, it finally dawned on her dad to go through the courts. Big mistake. There, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – God help him now –

was exposed, and this tied things up for quite a while. To make matters worse, while the law was on Alexa's side, the prosecution was another matter. A conservative type who knew the ropes, he kept pulling out this or that antiquated law to justify why Alexa should obey her dad and come home. The lawyer for the defence kept citing the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and said additionally that Alexa was also under the jurisdiction of Ontario provincial law. Things went back and forth, and just when it looked like her dad was about to regain custody of Alexa, April became May, and she turned 19. The decision was hers. The judge let the matter legally drop. Her dad was flustered, and her mom was to the point of tears, but over what one couldn't be sure. At some point, her mom got over it, as she contacted Alexa to tell her about her father's state.

Technically on her own, and not even needing her aunt anymore, Alexa felt they'd developed a good bond between them. Irene felt the same way. Alexa stayed with her aunt, worked, saved money, and eventually went downstream to Montreal three years later.

Alexa was determined not to show any feeling: no more tears; no more fear. Montreal had treated her well: Her friends supported her; she had a social life; she felt determined to make a life of her own here. She took whatever good there had been from her life before her father's conversion and discarded the rest.

However, her dad hadn't finished harassing her, though it was all in vain. She ignored him.

Lyne caught the bus back home, and none too soon: It started to rain. Lyne hated the rain. She found a seat, content to be away from the muck outside. It was late, too. She'd left work later than she'd anticipated. Some nights were like that.

At the next stop, a woman got on and sat down across from Lyne, silently, at the back of the bus. Though not packed, there were a few standees. Lyne was sitting in one of the seats which lined the insides of the back of the bus. The other woman's jeans were new and turned up at the cuffs to the inside. Lyne guessed the woman's jeans were Guess since that was a popular brand. This woman also wore a dark grey shirt, covered by an olive-drab K-way. Her left hand half-encircled her purse while her right clutched a bus ticket. An SAQ bag rested between her legs on the floor of the bus, its plastic handles held loosely by her right hand.

This woman sat squarely in her seat, but her head was turned towards the front, possibly keeping an eye out for her stop. In the moments when she turned her head in other directions, Lyne could see dark brown eyes underlined with some worry, wavy-brown hair up, a lime-green barrette holding it in place perhaps too tightly, exposing single-studded earrings. A ring on her right hand didn't demonstrate matrimony as much as it did fashion – *"wrong finger"*, figured Lyne.

Sometimes, this woman looked straight ahead, possibly looking at the chintzy ads, courtesy of the MUCTC. Lyne thought she recognized this other woman, perhaps having once had a class with her. Before getting the chance to ask, said woman changed seats and sat in one of the forward-facing seats on the left side, her head still turned towards the front.

The rain had remained constant by the time Lyne got to her stop. Fortunately, her place was only a few steps from the bus stop. Depeche Mode's "Enjoy the silence" was still in her head from that last dance. Her body ached: From the physical activity or the humidity, she couldn't tell. A hot bath was definitely in order. Lyne had worked her ass off enough tonight that she felt she'd earned it and whatever alcohol was still about.

The telephone rang. Owen immediately got a bad feeling about this.

"Skateboarding accident?" Owen quizzed Dannie. "Alexa? On a board again?"

"Well, I'll be damned. She did it. She finally did it. She always told me that she wanted to get back on one of those things again. Question is, who encouraged her? And why the hell was she boarding so far into the Fall, anyway? That's courting trouble."

Call-waiting functioned well. Owen said he'd come down to see Alexa as soon as he could. The other caller? Carina. She told Owen that Dannie had just called and said the same thing.

Alexa's injuries weren't too serious: a few bruises, contusion in one knee, no broken bones, just a little embarrassment. The doctor figured she'd be out of there very soon.

Much later, Owen ran into coke-head janitor, who waved 'hi'. Considering the janitor's attitude towards Owen's now-gone financial plight, Owen was in no mood, giving him "le doigt d'honneur".

Inside his apartment, Owen attempted to get a headstart on a paper not due for a while. At first, he scribbled a bunch of gibberish. One hour and 20 pages later, done: lots of notes, lots of doodling, but nothing cogent. Owen knew his luck: Something would hit him in the middle of the night.

Later on, he got a call from Alexa: out of the hospital, back home, and hopped up on painkillers. Owen hoped that she'd be all right.

"I've applied for three different universities and have a very good chance of getting into at least one of them. You should be proud of me. I'll make something of myself, like you always told me I should."

"There is no reason you should go to university. Grade 12 is enough", he said.

Alexa looked puzzled. "But you always told us that we could do whatever we wanted to in life, just try hard. And I'd like to go on and make something of myself."

"A woman's place is in the home. You don't need schooling for that. Just obey your husband." She looked at her father incredulously. "You are not serious."

He turned and looked at her suddenly. "Why not? I am your father and you are my responsibility until you get married."

"You do know that isn't the law anymore, right?"

"No matter. It is what I say. You only have to obey. It's in the scriptures."

"So what you're saying is that I'm to get married to someone. I imagine you've already arranged all this?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't bother to ask my opinion?" Alexa's frustration began to build. She wondered if the whole world had gone insane, descending into past practices, now ill-fit for modern life.

He got up and threatened to hit her, like he had so many times before. He hit her whenever she stood up for herself and say her life was her own. She remembered how cowing and submissive her mother, the very first role model in her life, was around Alexa's father. This was not the mother that Alexa grew up knowing.

The breaking point had arrived. Alexa went upstairs and came down with her father's 12-gauge shotgun, fully-loaded and pointing it at him. She told him that she was sick of him hitting her, that he was no longer her father, that her real father loved her and would never hit her.

Her father wanted Alexa's mother to call the police. Alexa goaded them into doing so, figuring all this would get out in the open. Alexa's mother said that the police don't get involved in domestic disputes. Alexa said that wasn't the law anymore, that assault is assault. Alexa's father said that Alexa was possessed but Alexa said it must be him who was possessed since she no longer knew him. Safety off, she drew a bead on him and pulled the trigger.

Alexa woke up suddenly. She gasped "No!". She was sure nobody else had heard it.

She looked around the room, all dark with few identifiable silhouettes, just to be sure she was in her own apartment. She turned on the bedside lamp just to make 100% sure that it wasn't her parents' place back in BC. She heaved a sigh of relief.

Dannie was sitting at the kitchen table, head down, asleep. She'd been working on some project, from what Alexa saw. Getting a glass and accidentally clinking it woke Dannie up.

"Y'know, 'Lex? I had a strange dream: You'd had a nightmare and were coming in here to get a glass of water. How strange is that?"

Alexa composed herself and knitted her eyebrows together and smiled. "Indeed. Very strange."

"And yet, here you are, getting a glass of water. I don't suppose you had a nightmare, did you?" Alexa nodded.

"I'm all ears."

"What about that?" Alexa asked, pointing to Dannie's project.

"That? Geez, I wasn't getting anywhere with it. Make me some tea?"

"Sure." Alexa told Dannie all about her nightmare.

"Shit. That's pretty intense, 'Lex. Did ya hafta do time for offing the bastich?"

"There's the thing: I didn't kill him. And it wasn't a gun I pulled on him; it was a baseball bat."

"Did you at least belt him outta the park?"

"I never even got that far."

"My vovó used to tell me that some dreams are prophetic. Might wanna check that out."

Alexa looked at Dannie, fascinated but concerned.

The University figured they had a case to close for the day and ended up giving its community a four-day weekend. From 1992 to 1995, the student population had had an average of one day off from school every fall session owing to an election or a referendum.

The timing of this referendum, Owen felt, could have been better weather-wise. The entire day had had the gusty-cold feeling that made the entire process of exercising his democratic rights a pain in the ass.

"Only the middle of February would've been worse."

After the polls closed, Owen wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He knew the University's pine system was going to be clogged with silly discussions, dissembling, posturing, and the occasional threat about what would happen if either side won. Owen felt the urge to write a sarcastic song about today but decided to put it off til later.

The phone rang. It was Alexa. She was having a referendum death-watch party – *"Come over. Bring Glenn, too."* Owen predicted it would be like the last Superbowl party, with few people really bothering to check the play-by-play, the rest doing other things. Owen had no doubt that Alexa had already invited a bunch of others over. He figured her two other roommates had done the same. He was curious to know who the mysterious Dannie was. In the times he went over to study with Carina, he always managed to miss Dannie.

Lyne and her current roommate Lise were already there when Owen and Glenn arrived. Owen thought it strange that Will didn't tag along for the evening. And there were many others besides: So many people visited in the course of the evening that Owen had lost track of who was coming and going.

"Most of these types I wouldn't know from Adam or Lilith. Scratch that: Debbie just walked in with two sides of mammoth meat passing themselves off as human. No, make that one boyfriend – her makeshift – and a fellow no-neck. I suppose these two have actual names. Maybe I'll learn them at some point. And maybe they're not all that bad. If you scratch below the surface..."

"Hey! Whar's the fucking beer, man?" roared no-neck #1.

"...one finds fat and it's all inside their heads. Trust Deb to take up cattle-herding at this time."

Owen couldn't figure out why Deb decided on bottom-feeding.

"Perhaps showing everyone that she's doing well without Tony in her life. Deb has nothing to prove so why bother with the put on?"

In walked Carina, after having made a trip to the local depanneur. Owen felt he was becoming attracted to Carina from all the hanging around and studying they'd done together. For now, he felt he should keep his distance but didn't know why.

Michel (alias no-neck #2) also seemed to have an interest in Carina. It was then and there that Owen realized why Debbie had brought these two homo-jocstrapulii over. Carina seemed to reciprocate the sentiment. As the first poll results started trickling in, with the Oui side in front, Owen decided to tune out and fade to the apartment's back balcony. He looked up the autumn night sky, wondering if there was an answer in the stars about how he felt. A wind blew but Owen could no longer be sure of the temperature. He felt numb on the inside. Short of looking at a thermometer, it could've been 40 below and he still wouldn't have been able to tell.

"Heya!" It was Dannie.

Upon seeing her face, Owen realized he'd run into her before. He recalled seeing her occasionally around the ABC, drifting in and out, and hanging out with the odd other member, like an acquaintance of an acquaintance. Owen figured it unlikely that Dannie would remember him from that group.

Alexa had probably also seen Dannie in the ABC setting but was really only there due to Owen, giving her no more regard than she would have most others. In a roommate situation, Alexa got to know Dannie and talked about her once in a while, usually in a musical or artistic context. Alexa tended to talk about people regarding every context that she knew, but with Dannie, Alexa limited things to those two subjects.

"Hi", said Owen, smiling at Dannie, who smiled back at him.

To his left, about 45 degrees, a room lit up, Carina and Michel in conversation, and she looked pretty animated. It looked like she was giving him a dressing-down. Owen almost didn't want to know what was going on, much less what was being said. Michel appeared like a bull elephant about to charge, but Carina stood her ground. Michel put his hands on Carina's shoulders. She looked at his hands like she wanted to remember them a certain way before doing something else to them. She glared at him. He released his hold, leaned in to kiss her, but got rebuffed.

"So, I guess you're not too interested what's on the idiot box right now?" Dannie asked Owen.

Concentration broken, Owen responded: "Nah, I'm fed up with politics in this country. Too repetitious." He was more curious about another sort of break-up.

"Repetitious? Try American politics. So, what brings you out here?"

"Something to do, I guess." Owen quite suddenly remembered another thing that Alexa had said about Dannie and spoke faster. "And what brings you out on the balcony when the party's in there?"

"Pretty lame-ass party", said Dannie in a rapid-fire fashion. "I've been to livelier funeral services. But it's where I live, and it's not like I have anything else to do tonight. Studying? What's that? Even in Studio Arts, it's not like I can just pick up a pencil and just draw what's here tonight, unless I'm in the mood to depict hippopotamuses, rhinos, or elephants posturing and making shit-tons of noise. Then I'd have no shortage of live material", she said, pointing her thumb towards Carina's room. "And for anything political, 1992 was the last time I got concerned."

Owen let a few seconds pass before Dannie's last words finally registered in his head. "Which one in 1992? Charlottetown? Or the US elections?"

"Yeah, the second one", she said, emphatically. "I voted for Clinton." Dannie turned to Owen, puzzled. "Hey, Lex told me you weren't into the political stuff. What gives?"

"Nothing major. I just fulfil this odd sense of civic duty for one day then wake up the next day and resume my life, providing I didn't vote away my right to vote. I know when something's going on, and I usually remember results and stuff like that. I just don't care to sit through every minute of every hour of all that media coverage. " 'Withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy', right?"

"Slackers!" they both said, pointing at each other and smiling.

"I think that sums up how I feel", said Dannie. "So, like, back in your old group, were you and 'Lex, you know? Once?"

Owen looked at Dannie curiously – "*ABC confirmed*". He winced then smiled. "Not exactly a known fact across the university but a poorly-kept secret among that group all the same." A cold wind crossed in front of Owen. "Alexa's one of those link-y types, whenever folks don't know one another."

"Lyne, too, or so I've noticed. You and Lyne too...?"

"What? Do you have invisible antennae or something?"

"Nah, I just notice stuff", she said, smiling.

"Yeah, she and I, too. We're all still good friends."

"So, have you dated every woman in town or what?"

"Working on it."

Dannie and Owen laughed at that.

Owen noticed peripherally that the light in Carina's room had gone out. He decided her situation wasn't worth caring about and instead concentrated on keeping Dannie entertained.

"I hear you're from the West Coast. So, why Montreal?" asked Dannie.

"Oh, I've been living here for the past seven years, going to school, working, stuff. What's your story?"

"I wanted to experience life in a smaller city and so came to your wonderful little university."

"And?"

"Four out of five."

"That good?"

"Hey, my opinion, okay?"

"Sure, whatever. I'd have given it three-and-a-half", Owen said, smirking.

"Yeah yeah yeah, don't split stars with me", she retorted, smiling and butting his hip in jest.

Just then, Carina opened the balcony door.

"Whassup, 'Rina?" asked Dannie. "Ya look down."

"Michel just left", said Carina.

"Yer boyfriend?" asked Owen.

"Hey", Dannie exclaimed, "he's catching on."

"I'm smarter than I look", quipped Owen.

"Ex-boyfriend, you mean", said Carina, making sure everyone present caught that first syllable.

"Whoa", said Dannie. "What happened, girl? That one lasted what three weeks? What happened to 'promising'?"

Carina shrugged her shoulders. "He was, for all of two days. I guess I was a little too quick to hope. I suppose he was a minor disaster to begin with."

"Live and learn?" Owen offered, similarly shrugging his shoulders.

"Yeh", said Dannie, "it's not the end of the world. Million fish, y'know?"

"I think I'll stay in port for a while", said Carina, languidly.

"Dannie?" said a voice from inside. "Phone call. Long-distance."

"Thanks, 'Lex", said Dannie. "See you two later. Hey, Carina: I don't usually say this, but cheer up. It could've been worse." She looked suddenly at Owen with a big smile. "Nice seeing ya again, Owen."

"I guess Alexa didn't feel like joining us, does she?" asked Owen.

"I overheard her phone conversation. It seems her father has died."

Owen smiled a little thinking of Alexa. He wasn't the least bit sympathetic.

"It didn't last long either", continued Carina.

"Well, you know what they say about the moment of death? So short compared to life. How we live our lives is more important. Lasts longer."

"I meant her phone conversation."

"She'll probably call back tomorrow for more details."

Carina looked at Owen strangely.

"Well, it is Alexa we're talking about here."

"Oh. I guess. I didn't know that about her."

Some seconds of awkward silence went by before Owen asked Carina how things looked inside. Carina spoke of how things had been between her and Michel, and how there were certain things about him that she wasn't comfortable with.

"Actually, I was talking about the referendum", said Owen, "but forget about that. What was Michel's problem?"

"Not to sound judgmental, but he drinks."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Not really. I mean, he starts on Thursday evening and continues until Monday morning. I can't understand anyone who does that, losing almost half a week like that."

"Yeah, that doesn't sound like anyone I know at our university", lied Owen, who knew a lot of people like that at his university. On occasion, that was him.

"He goes to McGill, actually."

"Oh, that makes more sense", joked Owen, healthy-slagging.

Carina laughed a little. "I feel a little uncomfortable in situations like that. Do you know what I mean? Like, how would you feel if someone bought you a beer when all you want is 7-Up or cranberry juice? Others can do what they want; just don't force it on me. And I like going out, but I just don't always feel like going to bars and poolrooms."

"What do you prefer, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Owen looked at her curiously.

"Well, no. Not exactly nothing. Just maybe sitting at home, watching a video over a pot of tea and some cookies. Or maybe, if we do go out, just to someplace quiet, or even for a stroll in the park, where we can hear our own voices, not everybody else's."

"Sounds nice. I mean, your version of a good evening."

"Yeah", Carina said, smiling. "I'm glad somebody else appreciates that."

"I also like cranberry juice", said Owen.

"Yeah." She looked at him warmly. "You do?"

Owen smiled.

The weather put Carina in her element. She could've lived in it all year long, with perhaps a two-week break in some warm, sunny place. Late November was generally a gloomy, dismal, dreary time for most people: the trees leaves-less; flowers closed up; temperature hovering around +5c, though the wind always made it feel 10 degrees lower than that; grey skies, not blue, the norm.

"Perfect weather."

She never had to worry about the conditions outside. She had so many things to do inside: studies, books, TV shows, classes, acting rehearsals, and teas to keep her warm and happy at any time.

Owen was scheduled to come over to Carina's place for another study session, but today Carina wished she hadn't said yes. Even after Owen's student loan had come in, Carina saw no reason for them to stop studying together. For her, this wasn't the problem; rather, it was how she felt being around Owen. She wasn't sure.

Since they started studying together almost three months ago, the two of them had developed a good rapport. There were days when either one asked the other to stay longer, and the frequency of this had been on the increase for a while now. The study time still stayed standard at one to one-and-a-half hours but more-and-more it made for less time compared to whatever else they did together. Sometimes, they talked freely about literature, whether they'd just studied it or in general. Sometimes, it was the people they knew, the profs each had had, the places each had been to or wanted to go to, the aspirations each had. Other times, they listened to music and talked about that, or they watched a movie or TV show, depending on the time. And all the time, there was tea, Carina's hot beverage of choice. Coffee was nowhere to be found in the conversation – Owen left out that it was his hot beverage of choice.

Carina wasn't sure whether Owen had conformed to her tastes or just was trying something new and getting comfortable with it but she felt flattered all the same. She also wondered about things possibly moving into another stage, one that she felt both apprehensive about and enticed by. The plans she'd had for her life didn't necessarily include staying in Montreal after studies finished, although she didn't rule out the possibility of it. Since starting at Concordia, she had never ruled out the idea of dating and getting serious, but it was simply never a big priority for her. Many of her dates disappointed her, save for Owen. She saw potential in him. She figured, if he'd moved around before, then he might not have a rough time moving to Windsor with her, if that was where she chose to go after studies.

"Except that we're not dating. Not technically, at any rate. But what is dating right now? Like, one man and one woman, hanging out together, doesn't constitute dating anymore, does it?"

Carina wasn't sure she should feel attracted to Owen. Given her career goals, she wasn't sure if she should act on that attraction.

Alexa wasn't entirely sure if it was a good idea to get involved with the English undergrad association. She saw the way they'd organized events in the past and felt that she could do better – in fact, during a wine and cheese party for English undergrads, having taken in a little too much liquid courage, she couldn't resist opening her mouth to say so. She was in for it, having either to eat her words or to own up to her own bragging. She held the wine responsible.

The president of the association asked would she feel up to organizing a literary reading. Alexa felt his words represented too easy an out, one which, if taken, would make her feel sheepish about opening her mouth in any situation.

She wondered what she'd gotten herself into. She'd organized all of one event to date, and then she was among three people who did this, so she wasn't sure just how much organization she'd really done. She took this as a challenge, figuring she'd be better off personally for having done it rather than see her self-confidence take another blow, one of too many in her life. She figured on soliciting advice from someone she knew.

"What could it hurt?"

She looked around Reggie's, scanning the decidedly low-density, Monday-evening crowd in hopes of finding a familiar face. Deadsville at the campus bar. The internet lab sounded more appealing.

Glenn was alone in the apartment. Most of the time, all three occupants were there. It was seldom when only one of them was there and even then the solitude didn't last long.

Marc was out doing whatever Marc did when he wasn't at home or studying. And Owen was over at Carina's, studying or whatever. Glenn wondered whether Owen was going to come home soon. Not that Glenn was playing parent to Owen here, but he did notice a pattern starting to develop.

Glenn also noticed that there wasn't a message on the answering machine. This was unusual. They usually got at least one message a day.

"Probably nothing."

He heard an intermittent beeping sound coming from Owen's room. He went to Owen's door and knocked. No answer. Once more. Still no answer.

There were locks on each room's door, generally never barred, except while the landlord's coke-head janitor was doing "work" around the building, and then Owen and company took no chances.

In that same spirit, there was a tacit agreement between roommates never to go into another's room uninvited except in the case of an emergency. For some reason, Glenn thought it was urgent enough to open Owen's door at least to see what the beeping was all about. True to schedule, there was no Owen. Owen's laptop was the origin of the beeping. In it, a telephone cable.

"That explains why no calls this evening", thought Glenn, who was about to disconnect Owen's forgetfulness in frustration over a possible missed call, when he realized that he could have fun with Owen's email account. Discovering the what of the beeping, he saw the why: Someone wanted to TalkChat with Owen. Glenn was somewhat versed in using email, though not to the extent that Owen was, but he did know enough about the TalkChat function, having used it quite a bit in recent times as a technique to scoring a date with someone, though it wasn't always successful.

Glenn accepted the invite just for the fun of it.

(ValGirl)>Hey Dopie. Took U long enuff.

(Opium)>Was in deep contemplation.

(ValGirl)>Trans: in the bathroom.

(Opium)>Pretty much.

(ValGirl)>Seriously? I'm in a sitch.

(Opium)>What kind?

(ValGirl)>Bad? Need a cafe. More yr thing than mine.

(Opium)>Sure. What's it for?

(ValGirl)>Lit reading. 1st wk of Dec, too.

(Opium)>East end okay?

(ValGirl)>How far east? Talking Con U's English dept here.

(Opium)>St-Laurent & Duluth.

(ValGirl)>The Main? Okay. Which place?

(Opium)>Try Bistro Jamais 2-sans-3. The owner's cool.

(ValGirl)>Cool. Thanks!

(Opium)>No probbos. Gotta fly, ValGirl. Soon?

(ValGirl)>Yup. Soon.

(Opium)>Cool.

Glenn spent the next 10 minutes trying to figure out how to erase this conversation. He knew he'd be in trouble if Owen saw this later. Glenn decided to leave the telephone wire plugged in, not to make

Owen suspicious, but chose to interrupt the connection by lifting the phone's receiver and pushing a button.

"That'll teach him", thought Glenn, placing the receiver back on its cradle after five seconds.

A minute later, the phone rang. Glenn let it go to the answering machine.

Alexa figured that finding and reserving a place was the hardest part of organizing any event. After that, she had to publicize and then get people to come out to the event. Then there was the question of sound: mic or no mic? She then realized that getting a place was the easiest part.

She thought of doing TalkChat again with Owen and then realized that something about her last session with him didn't track.

" 'No probbos'? Owen never says that. Was he in a daze or something? And he never calls me 'ValGirl' in TalkChat."

The next day, she asked Carina if there'd been anything odd in Owen's recent behaviour. Carina responded that Owen seemed to like what Carina liked more and more, which Alexa thought not out of the ordinary. Carina felt there was nothing out of sorts about this. In fact, she was starting to enjoy it.

Alexa began to wonder if there was something more going on than merely studying between Owen and Carina. However, she had a more pressing concern to deal with, namely the open mic night. Last night's transit ride home had given her time to think about the challenge ahead. She decided to forgo the suggestion of a literary reading, figuring that the university held those all the time. Besides, open mic nights were the thing nowadays.

She still had to consider was how she was going to pack the place and whether or not such an event had the potential to attract the wrong sort. The whole affair made her tired enough that a mid-morning nap would have seemed appealing, if not for a class.

Debbie received an email invite from Alexa. By and large, Debbie found open mic and lit readings annoying. She'd been to several in the past and figured that either one liked them or not. She was one of those usually in the "not" category. She liked hearing others read their work, but the events she'd been to in the past, she felt, were usually full of standoffish, defensive, or depressive folks, sometimes all three at once. To them, it was almost like everyone was out to flame whatever they'd written. She couldn't understand why anyone couldn't be energetic or at least show a sign of life while in front of everybody and reading. She wondered where was the flippancy or irony or heartfelt tone, things which she felt were the hallmarks of her generation. Disinterest rode high enough that she decided to beat a track out of there.

Now, here she was, a year after the last open mic night she'd attended, wondering how she should respond to Alexa's invitation.

"Well, she is practically begging me."

A wicked little smile formed on her face.

Owen received an invitation from Alexa. He thought it a little desperate in tone and hoped she hadn't sent this as a general invite to people she didn't know. Upon re-reading it, he realized it was for him only. The part about him bringing his poems, inviting whichever ABC friends were still around, in particular his MC friend who she otherwise detested, and leaving his guitar at home served as hints. She even thanked him for his suggestion.

Owen hummed and hawed over this a little bit. He usually found these things a drag. He'd once read at one two years prior and found much of the crowd to be mopey, end-of-the-world types. He got the impression the sorts he'd read in front of wanted people to be monotonous and sincere but depressing, telling of alienation and whatnot.

"Like something out of TS Eliot. Oh yeah. I can do that stuff too, but it's not my thing. I'm more the performer than anything else."

He found it quite curious that Alexa had thanked him for his suggestion.

"What suggestion?"

"Have you ever wondered whether they'll include writers of our time in the curriculum?" Carina asked Owen.

He placed his cup of cinnamon tea on the table, swallowing what he had in his mouth. "It's a curious enough question, considerin' what we're studyin' at the moment", he said, eyeing their anthology of literature of the Romantic Era.

Carina smiled. "It does seem like a lot of what we study is rooted in the distant past. I think the latest material I've ever looked at for class was literature from the 1960s."

"Well, we are living in a post-historic era, aren't we? No new music being made that hasn't been already made, no new stories being told that haven't already been told, no new events happening that haven't already happened."

Carina winced at that a bit. "That's a bit cynical, don't you think?"

"I only know what's been forced down my throat by various talking heads and self-proclaimed intellectuals. Same as everyone else. But yeah, ye're right. That was cynical of me. Flippant, too. Sorry."

She laughed a little. "Oh, don't apologize. Sometimes, even I'm like that. But why do I get the feeling that a lot of things since the mid-1980s have been ignored on purpose? I mean, shouldn't we be getting our due?"

"Sure, but every time we demand anything, we get called petulant and privileged. 'Having it too good for far too long', as one older person once told me."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Yeah, but that's the world we're in right now, living in the shadow of the Boom. Why do ye think I just go on doing what pleases me? I got tired of having it out with those types a long time ago. I mean, how can ye even hope to win an argument with someone who thinks ye're not as smart as them right from first blush?"

"I think our generation will be vindicated one day."

"Yup. Me, too. But til then, these types'll continue to look down at us."

"And we'll do what we want..."

"...and ignore them to boot."

"Live in the moment..."

"...and leave the history of now to future historians", said Owen, finishing Carina's sentence.

Carina smiled at Owen.

"I just thought of something", he continued. "There are some courses that have books written within the past 10 years. They're just not all that common. Besides, look at all the literature that came before."

"I wonder what it would've been like to live in earlier times?"

"You mean, like, women being treated as 'property'?"

"Having no right to vote?"

"Having no right to an opinion?"

"Men always being 'right'?"

"People of different cultures being treated like second-class citizens?"

"Would we even want to live in those times?"

Owen and Carina smiled at each other and then at the same time shook their heads and said, "Noooo!". They laughed.

Carina looked more at Owen and continued smiling. "I like the time we're living in now."

Owen felt Carina's hand come over his. He continued smiling as well.

Dannie walked in quite suddenly and started to say Carina's name but then said "Oops!" and walked right out again, but not before Owen called her back in.

"Are either of you going to this open mic night that Lex's organized?"

"Sounds like it might be fun", Carina said, looking into Owen's eyes. "We should go."

Owen smiled.

Tony wondered what he had been thinking, going to Alexa's event. She insisted that he show up. He knew that poetry readings bored him but he'd been only once to an open-mic night. He figured if

Alexa had organized it then it should be decent. Still, he feared that it might turn shambolic replete with occasional extended awkward pauses resulting from no one wanting to go up to mic.

"Thanks for coming. I really appreciate it", said Tony, meeting up with someone at Mont-Royal metro.

"Well, it should be good seeing some of the old gang again", she said, "and, I know you're not a fan of pretentious types."

"I also prefer not showing up alone, if you don't mind."

She smiled at Tony. "I don't. But you might wanna get over that some time. Just saying."

"Noted."

After a zig and a block, they were on Marie-Anne Street.

"So?" she started. "Were you involved in the referendum?"

He looked at her, smiling but saying nothing.

"I'd be surprised if you weren't", she continued.

"Yes but no."

"That's a bizarre response, coming from you. I know you. You're either involved, or you're not."

"It's not really important."

She looked at Tony strangely. "Okay. Be that way."

A zag and it was so long Marie-Anne, then another block, all to avoid going uphill too much.

Tony spoke suddenly. "The No campaign was getting hard-up for support – my opinion. The polls didn't look good. It looked like the Yes side was going to eke out a win. So the Non imitated the Oui and started tapping support from student leaders."

"And they called you."

"Among others. They wanted public endorsements, hoping to rally some soft support around the No."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't see a problem here."

"Well, I did. Fact, I saw a few problems. For starters, the No side was being run mainly by PC Youth and provincial Liberals. Buncha airheads."

"I recall you were one of those airheads at some point."

"As Owen would say, 'Tales of a misspent youth'. Eventually, I had to grow up. A shame they never did."

"I remember the media reports, saying the No side didn't have much of a plan."

"Hence the airheads. That's what happens when you let them plan your campaign. And 'not much of a plan' sounds generous. They didn't have a plan at all. It was improvisation all the way, and it showed. If flailing in desperation were an art form, then you'd cry to see it performed. 'La Danse pathétique des imbéciles' is what another federalist friend called it."

"Keeping Quebec in Canada sounds like a plan to me."

"That's a goal, and a good one, too, but it's not a plan. Like, how do you do this? How do you go from where you are to where you need to be? And without a roadmap? If they even had one, I don't think they bothered to open it."

"But the No won in the end anyway."

Tony scoffed. "Yeah, they won. Barely. They got lucky. It might've helped matters if they hadn't vilified or alienated anyone who didn't agree 100% with what they were saying. I asked them what was their strategy in the event they won – like, what were they going to do to keep Quebec in Canada, and once there, then what? For asking that, I was labelled a sovereignist. Me. A sovereignist? Listen, you know me: I want Quebec to stay in Canada. But we're not children. Nobody should talk down to us like children. What was the No offering? In the end, I concluded that all they had to offer was status-quo federalism. You don't solve a problem using the same logic that got you into that problem. Like I say, no game plan, no after-game plan. Plenty of reactionary spite, though."

She laughed. "Sorry, but I can't imagine you as a sovereignist."

"And I still voted No. I sure as hell wasn't going to vote 'Yes'."

"Even if they did have their act together."

"They can have their act together and I can still disagree with them. The No side couldn't tell the difference between 'disagree' and 'disrespect'."

"Do you think the No side accidentally turned off people enough that they voted Yes?"

"Treating undecided adults like ignorant children isn't the way to win hearts and minds, so yeah, they probably helped the Yes side more than any Yes extremist ever could've."

"You sound unimpressed, frustrated."

Tony looked at her. "That's about it. But what's worse? Try, just try, to tell any of them that they fucked up, and see what it gets you. Full-tilt bile. They don't believe they can make mistakes; that it's always someone else's fault. Buncha privileged wussies."

"I sense a plan coming up. What will you do about this? What can you do?"

"Something that can't be done overnight: Make a roadmap, something I have no time for right now. This is the place."

Tony's friend became the centre of many people's attention upon entering Bistro Jamais 2-sans-3.

"Mirka!"

Tony left Mirka to chat with others. No sign of Debbie. He saw Carina and Owen sitting companionably. At one point, Carina got up to go talk to a guy who'd just come in. Tony went over to talk to Owen and tried to tell him something he ought to know about Carina. He never got the chance. Carina returned to the table earlier than Tony had anticipated. Owen wasn't sure what Tony had intended to tell him but hoped that it wasn't anything a spiteful ex might say.

One AM, back at his apartment.

He didn't know if the others were home or still out for the night, but Owen did know that Alexa's event was a success.

Owen wasn't quite ready to hit the hay but also wasn't in the mood for either TV shows or video games. He thought about tuning in to whichever late-night radio show caught his ear, his headphones on in case one of his roomies was home. The idea of only listening to music didn't quite appeal to him. He looked at his laptop, thinking it a bad idea to go on-line at this point. He did anyway.

He didn't notice any new email in his in-box and figured it might be a good idea to browse the various newsgroups. At that point, one email popped into his in-box from an on-line friend living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Owen first encountered "Lowlite" after reading various flames, spammings, crosspostings, and other responses on the alt.music.female.indie newsgroup. Getting tired of the above tripe, he not-so-seriously suggested that people start a new newsgroup which he dubbed "alt.spam.crosspost." Lowlite kindly told him to "get the fuck off the 'net and stop crossposting, newbie." After informing Lowlite that Owen wasn't a "newbie", but was merely fed up with having to filter through the noise just to hear about the music he liked, she or he – Owen never established which pronoun Lowlite went by – started to take him more seriously.

TO:Lowlite (noonsp@potpipe.com)

FROM:Opium (on_powe@vega.concu.ca)

SUBJECT:Stuff 'n' stuff

Hi-dee-ho Lowlite!

*Tis I, from the Great White North. How're things down in Tulsa? Anything new on MTV?
Rhetorical question.*

I just got that new Amps album you've been nagging at me to get. I'd heard two songs offa it since last December, but not the whole thing. Sounds weird hearing Kim D & co. on lo-fi, but it's pretty awesome, all told. Unfortunately, I fear she won't be reassembling her old band anytime too soon. I guess it's the dawn of another mini-era of left-of-radar music, eh?

Maybe that's a good thing. Have you heard some of the crap on the airwaves these days? And the majors are pawning these bands off as being "alternative" because they're copying licks and tricks from original groups that exploded onto the mainstream stage back in '91 & '92. They're so last week it's not funny. I mean, really? Alternative? Alternative to what?

Lowlite, I'm beginning to think "alternative" means dick these days. In fact, I wonder if it ever really did?

I'm disappointed. There's so little I like out there nowadays. I've resorted to listening to older music. I call it "retro-underground": Camper, Husker, the Mats, the Pixies, Green River, MC5, New York Dolls, Black Flag, Bad Brains, Orange Juice, Dead Kennedys, Green River, the Ramones, and older stuff by REM and Screaming Trees. This, of course, is in addition to L7, 7YB, BIT, AIC, Mudhoney, Tori, FNM, Soundgarden, and SY. Compared to new stuff coming out these days, even the first five VH albums sound mighty fine.

Funny how things can change so quickly and yet not change at all. Ten years ago, "metal" meant boring, bloated, sexist, macho crap with stupid lyrics and guys (usually) singing about a lifestyle I've never had and could never have and certainly didn't want at all. I remember one of those videos: Five guys standing by this fire engine, wearing fire hats and skimpy leather trappings, watching this woman strut by in a t-shirt, fire-hat and hot-pants, and singing about how she's so hot that she has to be doused with water. Pretty fuckin' dull shit.

Objectifying, too. A waste of vid-space and sound bytes. Course, from what I understand, the band that did this vid/song has pretty much charted a new course musically, but I've yet to hear it.

My bone of contention? Nowadays, I'm still expected to like this "alternative" music as if it were a medium of choice – mine. Well, it sounds like a lot of those bands I was into 5-10 years ago, but it's actually a formulaic rut, and it's getting pretty stale, all told. I'm unable to identify with it – musically or lyrically – because it doesn't speak to or about me. I know that sounds selfish, but what doesn't strike a chord with me doesn't interest me.

Anyway, Lowlite, gotta get. Places to went and people to did.

Have a life.

Ciao 4 now.

Opium.

Owen was into another newsgroup – "alt.music.killrockstars" this time – when, 15 minutes later, a message flashed across the bottom of his screen:

"Request by cf_leri."

(cf_leri)>Hi, Owen. It's me, Carina. How are you?

(Opium)>Good. How about U?

(cf_leri)>Fine.

(Opium)>Better than earlier on?

(cf_leri)>A little.

(Opium)>I'm not gonna ask U what happened unless U wanna say anything. Otherwise, I'm all ears.

(Opium)>Er, eyes?

(cf_leri)>Ha ha. Eyes will do, thanks. I was a little out of sorts earlier.

(Opium)>Y's that?

(cf_leri)>Maybe U noticed someone trying 2 get my attention. Remember that guy?

(Opium)>How could I forget? & as a reading was about to start?

(cf_leri)>Timing was never his strong suit.

(Opium)>Aside from bad timing, what was his problem?

(cf_leri)>Not taking no for an answer.

(Opium)>In answer to what?

(cf_leri)>A question. Going out on another date with me.

(Opium)>Oh, so he's an ex-non-boyfriend?

(cf_leri)>Ha ha. Yeah, I guess. I never thought about him that way.

(Opium)>There U go.

(cf_leri)>And U? U stepped out 4 a bit. Were U feeling okay?

(Opium)>Me? Oh, I just needed some fresh air.

(cf_leri)>U have a high tolerance 4 cold weather.

(Opium)>I guess I've lived here long enough. Dunno. So how'd you meet that guy?
 (cf_leri)>Jealous?
 (Opium)>Curious is more like it.
 (cf_leri)>Same person who introduced me to Michel.
 (Opium)>2 in a row from the same person? Too much.
 (cf_leri)>Actually, 3. But, yeah, there was a trend.
 (Opium)>Q: Do U believe U're truly in need of a guy?
 (cf_leri)>U're not having 2nd thoughts about us, RU?
 (Opium)>Hardly. Curious enuff to see where this'll go. But I'm also curious about U & what U think.
 (cf_leri)>Not many guys say that.
 (Opium)>Maybe not many guys R willing 2 admit something like that. Who knows?
 (cf_leri)>Indeed! Well, dear, I'm going 2 sleep.
 (Opium)>I know. I'm not the most entertaining person on the 'net.
 (cf_leri)>Ha Ha. No, I mean, I'm going 2 go 2 sleep.
 (Opium)>Sounds like a good idea. I'm starting to get tired myself.
 (cf_leri)>Not of me, I hope?
 (Opium)>Never. Sorry. I'm smiling right now.
 (cf_leri)>So am I. No sorry required.
 (Opium)>C each other 2morro?
 (cf_leri)>No can do. Busy. The next day, 2. I've rehearsal. It ends at 9PM.
 (Opium)>At Loyola, right?
 (cf_leri)>Yes.
 (Opium)>How about a L8 snack at George's?
 (cf_leri)>Sure. We can do that. 9:20?
 (Opium)>Great. See U there.
 (cf_leri)>Yeah. Take care till then. Love U.
 (Opium)>Love U, 2. G'night.
 (cf_leri)>Good night.

She walked slowly, cautiously, from the practice hall to George's. She got the gut-feeling that she would run into someone who she had no desire to run into, perhaps an ex, or a female classmate who tried to proposition her last year, or perhaps some stranger who thought her an easy mark. She really had no desire to show up at George's shaken.

Carina now wished she'd asked Owen to meet her outside of the practice hall for rehearsal's end. It didn't occur to her to ask him.

"Nor did he even offer. Hmph."

She tried to relax. She reminded herself that the only exam she had to do was already done, that her show wasn't for another two days.

She wondered again about Owen.

"He's a nice guy: cute, smart, talented, and he converses in a most entertaining way. I like him, perhaps more than any other guy I've met recently. There is a part of me who really wants to be with him, I think, but I know what can happen when I open my heart to another."

She'd been cautious in recent times regarding relationships. In her last year of high-school, her attitude about relationships had soured. The legal hassle that followed her only high-school relationship only put her off taking these things or anyone wanting them seriously.

"What a fallout that was. Maybe I'm afraid that whole act will play out with a different character, on a different stage, but with the same tragic ending. Maybe... I should just pull myself together. Maybe this time, things will be different."

She left the campus grounds through which she had shortcut to get to Sherbrooke Street West. She thought she'd heard something. She stopped stock-still. She then turned around quickly but saw no one there. She put her hand up to her head, which she shook slightly.

"Just wind. Get a hold of yourself, Carina. Keep this up and you'll show up rattled without anyone's help."

As she walked quite slowly along Sherbrooke, her thoughts turned to her career. She became quite angry.

"My career is important to me. It's hard for anyone my age not to think about careers. Job stability is not what it once was. I've always wanted to be in acting. This is something I've worked hard for. I don't want happening to me what has happened to others; where they got going on a career path but had to stop because of someone. The thought that I should sacrifice all that I am for one guy is ridiculous. I'd like to have someone special in my life, but I have many demands. Whoever wants me has to be willing to go the distance with me."

She saw George's ahead of her.

"Then again, we're not really at that stage yet where I know what he will or will not do. Maybe I shouldn't assume so much about him. About us."

Coffee in front of him but no food, Owen sat, warm inside. He had sheet music but nary a note on it. He anticipated Carina being late.

"She always is. More's the charm."

Insecurity visited him. He wasn't quite sure what it was – like a gut feeling warding him away from her. He'd had this feeling before, but then like now his gut and his heart didn't agree with each other, and his brain generally followed his heart. His gut had been outvoted 2 to 1. He was falling in love.

He stopped looking at the almost-noteless sheet in front of him and took a sip of his coffee. He wondered what the future held for them. He thought about the idea of moving to Windsor with her, if she chose to move back there. Or perhaps he could convince her to stay in Montreal. Where things were going he couldn't tell. Just when his brain was about to over-think matters, his heart sounded the drums loudly. He couldn't wait to see Carina again. She could be as late as she wanted for all Owen cared.

It was 9:45 when Carina came into George's and saw Owen sitting there with his sheet music, smiling, happy to see her.

"Sorry I'm late", said Carina, removing her winter clothes.

"No trouble at all", said Owen, still smiling, putting away his pencil and sheet music. "Are you alright? Did the rehearsal run late? Or was someone bothering you?"

"If you promise not to have a heart attack, then I'll tell you."

Owen let out a little laugh. "I'm calm. No worries."

"Good. I'm fine. We finished a few minutes late. And no, no one was bothering me. I'm always late. I can't help it. I guess it's hereditary. My mother was an hour late for her own wedding, and my father is rarely on time. Were you actually concerned about me?"

The waitress approached them with menus in hand. They both ordered fries and tea.

"So, yes," he uttered, "to answer yer question."

"My...? Oh, that!"

"Yeh, that. I was concerned about ya. Maybe I should've come to meet you right after your practice?"

Carina smiled – *"Better late than never. This guy's got potential"*, she thought – but decided on the defensive approach, just to make sure.

"Yes, well, you could have, but I'm here all the same, and I think you're happy with that", she said, taking his hands.

Owen eked out a wince before regaining his smiling composure. It was -15 Celsius outside, and the cold of Carina's hands had shocked him.

"Sorry", she said, almost ashamed to say it but still managing to laugh a little.

"No harm done", he replied, still smiling at her.

"You know, sometimes I wonder where the time has gone. It feels like yesterday when we met."

"Studies have a way o' doing that to ye. One minute, ye're in yer first class of the semester, crackin' open books and studyin'; the next, ye're entering the exam hall or handing in that end-of-term assignment."

"Which do you prefer? Sitting an exam? Or doing a take-home assignment?"

"Take-homes, hands down. Doing an exam, I could forget anything and scrap my grade. But d'ye know what's the worst? Writing a long essay or essays while sitting in the exam hall and under a time limit."

"That doesn't sound very appealing."

"It isn't. The pressure's worse than yer average exam. I know. I speak from experience." The waitress brought their fries and teas and smiled at each of them. "So, what's your holiday schedule looking like?" asked Owen.

Carina looked down at her plate, putting vinegar on her fries. "I'll leave here a few days before Christmas. Back at the parents' place for two weeks. Then return a few days after New Year's. Try not to miss me too much, okay?"

Owen smiled at her again.

"And what about you?" she continued. "Will you go back to BC to be with your family?"

There was silence on Owen's end. His smile slowly disappeared.

"You will go back, won't you?" pressed Carina.

Owen shrugged his shoulders then tried to smile a bit. "There's, uh, no one to go home to."

Carina got concerned. "No one at all? No parents?"

Owen shook his head. "My folks died in a car accident when I was 15. My granny died a few years later. There's not really any family to speak of to go back home to. I've pretty much been an orphan since then."

"Oh, Owen. I'm sorry. I hope I didn't pry too much."

"No, you didn't. We're cool. I think you can pry as much as you like, providing my life story doesn't become the subject of gossip or, worse, a novel."

"Fair enough. So, what have you done for Christmas since first arriving here?"

"Most of the time, it's been friends' and girlfriends' families here. I've never been unwelcome. I did go back to BC to visit an aunt and uncle. Once."

"I thought you said you have no family left."

"Depends on how you define 'family'. Anyway, this year I'll be alone."

Carina thought that, if she'd gone out with Owen sooner and hadn't wasted time with others, she could've invited him to spend at least Christmas Day with her and her family.

"Too soon."

She thought about saying "*oh, what the hell*" and inviting Owen back to her parents' place but then backtracked on it.

"I'm sure you'll find something to do over the holidays", said Carina. "Do you like postcards?"

"Always! I love getting'em and sending'em."

"Well, there's not much to brag about in Windsor, but there are postcards. Just give me your mailing address before I leave. Okay?"

Time passed and the owner, George, came out of his kitchen to say that the place was going to close for the night soon. Owen wondered where the time had gone. It was midnight already. He and Owen chatted a bit about this and that before Owen and Carina finally got up and paid the bill.

"It's like you know everyone in Montreal", said Carina, as they were walking home.

"Working on it", quipped Owen. Waiting for the bus to come at this hour amounted to one slowly freezing, even under what passed for bus shelters these days. Movement was better.

They didn't talk for a good while. They walked down Sherbrooke West towards their respective neighbourhoods. Neither of them felt like talking; just walking hand in hand. On occasion, but never for too long, they stopped to admire the night sky. At one point, there was no wind. The cold hung in the air with a crisp quality.

"Beautiful night, eh?" said Owen.

"Yeah", said Carina. "Kind of like a Van Gogh painting."

"Starry Night", they both said at the same time. They laughed a little.

They walked some more before Owen said, "Well, here's my place. Are you sure you don't want me to walk you to yours? It's no trouble."

"I'll be fine. I'm just three blocks away. I'm sure nothing will happen along the way."

"If you insist."

They kissed for the first time in their relationship. She kissed beautifully. Owen felt it had been worth the wait.

Back in his apartment, Owen warmed up. He remained concerned that Carina was going to be okay getting home. He felt tired but content enough that he could sense a very good night's sleep coming on. He lay his head on the pillow and faced the ceiling. His gut told him everything wasn't going to be all right, but his brain was into dance music and his heart provided the beat.

Boom-boom, boom-boom...

Carina sat on the couch, trying to relax with a book she'd started before going to bed last night. After two minutes, she put the book down, giving in to a state of distraction or division. Owen was still on her mind, as was the play she was going to perform in two days. She took the playbook out of her bag and went over her lines again. She was Gilda in the stage version of Alfie. She had to be concerned with neither overacting nor understating the part too much. A part of her felt that others would dictate her acting, no matter how she played things. She wondered if this portended something.

Lines were blurring together. Focus was not possible. Sleep was.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Owen."

"Hi yerself, Lyne."

"Did I wake you? Oh, that's right: I couldn't have. You're always asleep."

"Huh? What didjy say? I was asleep."

She laughed. "Well, haul yer ass out of bed, and come by my place."

"Without my clothes on? I'll freeze!"

"Niaseux. Yes, without yer clothes on... and don't bother showering either. I want you nice and stinky."

"So, where are we going and what are we going to do?"

"Breakfast. Actually, stay there. I'll be over in 30 minutes."

"Here. There. I wish you'd make up my mind."

"That's not difficult to do."

"Sheesh! See ya in a half."

Owen jumped-scared on hearing a wolf-whistle as he came out of the shower, housecoat partially open.

"Ooo, dance for me. Take it off", Lyne said, smiling.

"Yeah, Owen", Marc joined in. "Take it off."

"In yer dreams, boyo", said Owen to Marc. "OK. Give me five minutes to find something respectable to wear." Two minutes later, he asked Lyne the most important question anyone could ever ask when talking about breakfast: "Where are we going?"

"Oh, that little place on the corner is good."

That little place on the corner served breakfast all day long – bottomless coffee included – and was perfect for a meal and the customary bowl session between friends. Owen had learnt some time ago not to order a multi-course breakfast there: The owners tended to look at him while he was eating, and this was something he didn't like, no matter the reason.

"So, what happened to you last night?" asked Lyne, sitting down.

Owen looked at Lyne somewhat perplexed.

"I heard from Ginette. You didn't show up for choir rehearsal last night."

Owen was confused. "Why would Ginette even care? How could she notice that I wasn't there?"

Lyne looked at Owen too seriously. "You have got to be shitting me."

Owen almost regretted having taught Lyne that expression.

"When you're not there", Lyne continued, "everyone notices. You take up a space that no one else can."

"Yeh, I do kinda do that, now don't I? What can I say? I called in sick."

"Do I have to remind you that you have a concert in two days?"

"Oui, m'ma."

Lyne looked at Owen like she wanted to shoot bolts out of her eyes but since she hadn't quite evolved the talent for it decided to tolerate his casual misogyny for the moment.

Owen softened his tone. "I was with Carina last night."

Lyne stared at Owen in disbelief. Their coffees arrived at that point. Owen felt that this was going to be a four-cup morning.

Owen sighed. He wasn't sure how to tell Lyne anything further: *"Hey, Lyne. Guess what? Let me tell you, one of my exes, all about the person I'm currently in love with. Yeah, like that's gonna go over really well."*

"You're in love with her, aren't you?" said Lyne.

He smiled a little, curious.

She continued: "When I mention her name, you have that same look in your eyes like when we first met. Well, I like that you're being honest with me. People like you have such hang-ups over things like that. We had fun while it lasted. But what's done is done. I'm over it. And so are you. Admit it."

"I am. Just that, I've never been in this situation before. I was without words."

"Owen Powell. Without words. Well, that's a first."

Owen laughed.

"So, what did you talk about last night?" asked Lyne.

"Well, we were at George's for a late supper. We chatted about everything — well, almost everything. After that, I walked her as far as my door. I offered to walk her home but she insisted otherwise. That's really about all we've done together recently. She's pretty busy..."

"...and?"

"And we kissed." Owen smiled. "I slept very well last night."

"That's it? No after-first-date sex?"

Owen shook his head. "It didn't feel right."

Lyne smiled. "That's a first for you. Not your usual."

"So what about Will?" asked Owen, hoping to change the subject.

"You like to exhume corpses, don't you?"

"Grandma always said I'd be a med student. Boy was she wrong! You, on the other hand..."

"OK. OK. *Ça suffit*."

"OK. But since when is Will a corpse? Did commodore-mother send him into a no-win fighting for crown and country, or something like that?"

"Niaiseux. No, he's fine."

"... and?"

"... and he wants me to come over to his place for Christmas dinner."

"Ooo. He's getting brave."

"And he wants me to meet his parents. They insisted. They want to meet the woman who'd go out with their son."

"Oooh. Now they're getting brave."

Lyne giggled. "Ye're funny."

"But looks aren't everything, right?"

Lyne bunched up her lips in a certain way. "I thought you were sick of that joke."

"Only when you tell it."

"Ha ha", she laughed sarcastically. "Anyway, my little finger says don't go to Will's place. I dunno. Maybe I should give Will's mother a chance. Maybe she doesn't know what kind of person she's gonna meet when she meets me."

"Yeah, maybe." Owen sipped his coffee and then put it down. "I think everything's gonna be alright. If you do everything right on your end, then at least you made the effort. Let's hope she appreciates it."

They clinked coffee mugs.

"Will you see Carina before Christmas?" asked Lyne.

Owen nodded. "Looking forward to it, too."

November shadowed this particular December morning. It had snowed but not much and what snow there was hadn't stayed on the ground for long. Asphalt was good for heat retention for at least three months after the "official" end of Summer, and early snow had no chance of remaining long, barring a drastic drop in temperature, followed by more snow.

The sky, grey; the temperature, cold enough; the trees leaf-less. Not very pleasant weather as far as Owen was concerned. If it had to be gray, then he would prefer it near the sea. When inland, he preferred the sun.

"But the sun can't shine every day, now can it?"

Still, he felt he could ignore weather conditions like this whenever he was with Carina. He was to see her one last time before she went back home for Christmas. Owen felt that this was going to be an anxious meeting. They were to be away from each other for at least two weeks, and their relationship was relatively new. But Owen had been putting this off long enough. Every time he and Carina met up, she wanted it more and more. Each time they met, he said, "next time". Each time, he forgot. After a while, he figured that she'd want it so badly as to be completely desperate or otherwise go out and look for it elsewhere. Owen didn't want that.

This time, Owen made sure not to forget.

Carina met him at her door downstairs. "Owen", she said, knitting her brows a little, and feigning anxiety, "Did you remember this time?"

"Yup!"

A big smile grew on Carina's face.

Owen pulled a book from his satchel.

Carina beamed. "Oh, thank you so much!"

Owen stood a little ashamed.

"You. Kept. Me. Waiting", said Carina, pointedly but softly. She pulled Owen toward her and kissed him.

"Who'd'a thought someone so anxious to receive a book from me?" he said.

"Oh, I'm totally into modern British art. This book is out of print and hard to find used. It was worth the wait."

"Glad to help."

Owen got the feeling that this would be the high point of their meeting today. His gut cried out, *"prepare to be let down!"*

"Um, look, Owen, I know we were supposed to spend time together tonight, but I can't stay long. In fact, I have to go do some things before leaving... tomorrow. Mm, and I'm not sure about tonight."

Gut 1; Heart 0.

She gave him a hug. "I wanted to see you again before leaving, but there's just no time. Sorry."

"Ey, you do what you gotta do. Don't worry 'bout me: I'll live."

"I have to go", she said, kissing him again.

Door closed, Owen stood there for a bit. He felt somewhere between disbelief and disappointment. As he turned and started to walk back to his place, the street seemed colder, more unwelcoming, than before. Along this stretch and under these conditions, Owen started thinking negatively about his life and things in general. He thought he should put a stop to that and try to think positively. But he found it difficult in this gloomy weather. His heart felt heavy and exposed, his winter coat not being big enough. He looked forward to getting back to his warm apartment and making a pot of herb tea.

Ten minutes gone. Already Owen missed Carina.

In the time leading up til Christmas Day, Owen had the opportunity to think about things. He composed a few songs, read for pleasure, and took the opportunity to window-shop along rue Ste-Catherine. However, these activities only reminded him of Carina.

Whenever he composed, her spoken rhythm and cadences played into it.

Whenever he read, saw, or heard any mention of or allusion to drama, modernism, British playwrights, or anything regarding the theatre in general, he thought about her.

And window-shopping for Owen had always been a team sport, his recent and usual partner in this being Carina.

He felt he could make better use of his down-time by re-organizing his space, something he often referred to as "Cleaning my room": putting his books back in their proper places, filing papers accordingly, and determining what got shipped into recycling. And then there was laundry – *"The hell that never ends"* – so Owen took his clothes for a walk. Downstairs. Even in the dead of winter, he never had to worry about going outside for this.

He had always had a problem with laundry, especially where socks were concerned. Every once in a blue moon, one sock went missing. Owen thought it inconsiderate how his socks hadn't had the decency to go missing together. His sock drawer had a good hundred or so singles in it, none to be matched up. Whenever he wore his mismatched socks in public, he wrote the pairing off as an artistic statement.

"I think there exists a pocket dimension where all these misplaced socks go. Buttons, too, I'm sure. And maybe a few things which went missing the last time I moved. Ah, no: I found those things. Maybe they visited that little dimension only briefly; long enough to give me a scare but not so long as to send me a postcard."

Later, Owen was up at the chalet on Mount Royal but wasn't sure why. The place had been abandoned and locked up for years. He'd just felt like going for a walk up the mountain. There weren't many people on the belvedere – those present were in couples. Owen didn't feel very welcome in this place. He took the winding path back towards the south side. He'd wanted to take the long staircase to the bottom but discovered that it had been removed. This pissed off a lot of park goers and joggers who liked taking the stairs though it didn't deter the odd BMX biker from taking chances.

It felt somewhat cold on the mountain path but was worse with the wind blowing it all in Owen's face. Not far from Beaver Lake, the wind just stopped. It felt cold and crisp, like that one night, clear and starry, when Owen and Carina walked home together. Owen could hear the sound of something Nutcracker-ish. He stopped to look at the skaters on Beaver Lake: It was a moment of magic for him, as if to regain, if only for a moment, the same fascination he'd once had as a child.

He wondered what had happened to that innocence; where it all went; and could he ever get any of it back intentionally and not simply by a turn of the wind. He realized that he was being silly, and, after a few more seconds of watching skaters from afar, he went on his way, down the mountain. The wind resumed.

He decided to break from the mountain path halfway down and go directly into downtown, unsure of his next destination. He looked along the street and noticed that the local HMV was still open. He went in to look around. He used to do this during his last two years of high-school back in Hatzquiam, BC. The local downtown mall had a size-able music store that he used to tool around in after classes finished for the day. Sometimes he went alone. Other times he was with this friend or that, or even a few friends. Owen was more the drifter than the loner at high-school: just going from one crowd to another, doing whatever he felt like, as long as there was music, even browsing for it.

As he sauntered through this store, looking at this thing or that, he could feel the temptation to turn to Tad, Aidan, or, in the last two months of last year, Robbie or Scott, and say "Hey, check this out" whenever there was an interesting, artistic, or just plain weird album or cassette cover.

Except that they weren't here.

He remembered Robbie always getting excited whenever he saw something with a motorcycle on it, telling everyone that one day he was going to buy one of those. Owen half-joked to Robbie that motorcycles would one day be Robbie's undoing. Tad joked about how Robbie would probably outlive everyone in the Class of '86. Robbie said they'd all live to see at least the 50th anniversary of their high-school graduating class.

Owen wondered how everyone from his old high-school was doing and what they were up to these days. His mind drifted away from the store's CD collection he was mindlessly looking through, much of it garbage in his opinion. He decided to go home.

Along the way, he thought about how his trips to that music store and up the mountain didn't really get his mind off Carina.

He noticed a Christmas card in his mailbox back home. The giveaway? A colourful envelope with a Christmas stamp on it. It was from Tad.

"Speak of the devil. No doubt there's a letter inside it, too."

Tad was always good about sending out cards and the occasional letter to people he and Owen used to go to high-school with. Tad always seemed to know what was going on, at least in Vancouver, although not so much about Hatzquiam anymore. Tad never volunteered why and Owen never bothered to ask. Owen figured, with Christmas less than a week away, he should send Tad a card and keep the message short. Owen wondered whether he would ever get his act together when it came to sending out Christmas cards on time.

A piece of paper slipped out of the art book Owen had lent to Carina. Picking it up gently off the passenger car's floor and turning it over to see what it said, her face softened, and she smiled warmly as she read the poem on it:

'Today.

I can see the sun

in your eyes.

The wonder

of love

in life.

In your thoughts,

and in your words,

in everything from you

that is heard,

I feel security.

And your presence

Makes my darkest days

turn to light.'

She wasn't sure what to make of this. Her heart felt warmer by the second. She loved what she'd read. She loved the one who'd written it.

Despite herself, a frown slowly formed on her face.

"Hey Owen,

Hope you're well. How are studies going? When'll you finish?

I'm fine. Going back to school. Law this time. Trying to "move up" in the profession.

Some seriously weird shit's going down politically.

One group I'm part of is getting all intense, cult-of-personality like. Thinking of getting gone.

Aidan's getting married soon. I think he finally struck pay-dirt here.

Have a Happy Christmas!

Hear from you soon.

Tad."

Tad's little letter remained open on Owen's desk as of Christmas morning. Owen re-read it and smiled. He wasn't normally the type to reminisce about past parts of his life, but he had been doing so in recent days.

Christmas morning was a quiet affair in the apartment. Marc had gone to his parents' place for a few days. Glenn was keeping company with someone – "*Jailbait*", thought Owen. He had the place all to himself. He decided on an internet-free day, content not to hear keyboard clack-clacking. It was snowing outside. For him, snow falling on Christmas Day was rare and rather magical. While growing up in BC, snow on Christmas Day was what happened in other places. The first time he'd seen it was his first Christmas in Montreal. That Christmas, he'd also been alone.

He made some cinnamon tea, brought it back into his room, pushed play on his cassette deck – Christmas Eve Suite by Rimsky-Korsakov – swivelled his office chair around to face his window, and propped his feet up on his recently made bed. He intended not to mope around today but instead count his blessings and try to see the world with some degree of wonder.

The snowfall outside seemed to play nicely with the opening segment of the music. Owen could imagine, perhaps foolishly, that he was watching some poor family, not much to their names, still managing to be together and be warm to each other on what Owen felt was a special day despite the

cold outside. He also thought he could imagine mice, toy soldiers, nutcrackers, and ballerinas dancing to this music rather than that of Tchaikovsky. He began to think that, if he were alone next Easter long weekend, he could do all this again but this time listening to Rimsky-Korsakov's Russian Easter Festival Overture.

"Not the same magic to it", thought Owen, all the same pleased with that idea.

Near the end of the music he'd been listening to, the phone rang. He paused the music. He looked at the clock: 10AM.

"Who could be calling at this time on this day?"

"Hi, Owen. Merry Christmas!" said Carina.

"You too", Owen meekly responded. "How are ya?"

"I'm fine, but I had some trouble sleeping last night. I guess it's Christmas jitters or something like that."

"Still that feeling of excitement of what next morning will hold? Yeh, that never goes away."

"I always feel like a child on this day."

"That may not necessarily be a bad thing."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not a bad thing to hold on to that bit of our innocence, is it?"

"Hmm. I didn't see it that way. Interesting."

They continued talking at length about many subjects. They both seemed to lose track of time whenever talking to one another, so it was hard to tell how much time they'd spent on the phone.

"You can have it, if you want", said Owen, when Carina brought up the book he'd lent her.

"Oh, no. I couldn't."

"Think of it as my Christmas gift to you."

"Would this be in addition to the one you put inside it? You know? That piece of paper?"

There was a strange silence for a few seconds as Owen couldn't decide on being shy or proud of himself. He hoped she'd at least liked the poem.

"Is this for me? About me?" she asked, hoping.

"Yeah", said Owen, softly. He wasn't sure if further words were necessary.

A brief silence. Carina smiled, feeling there was enough sincerity in that one word. "That's so sweet of you, Owen. I miss you and can't wait to be with you again."

"Same here."

"Try to stay out of trouble until I get back, okay?" Carina half-joked.

"I'll see if Alexa's still using her skateboard."

"Don't...!"

"Kidding!"

Carina laughed.

"An' anyway, it's snowing outside, so no luck skateboarding."

"You have snow there?" asked Carina.

"Yeh. None there?"

"Not a hope of a flake at the moment. Knowing my luck, it will snow the day I leave here."

"Careful what you wish for."

"Too right. Gotta go. Love you lots."

"Me too, babe."

Carina felt bad.

Owen rewound the cassette and listened to it all over again. He felt great.

"Lovely morning."

Owen re-read Tad's letter closer to supper time. He thought of his grandmother's house, where he'd lived while going to school in Hatzquiam. His grandmother had bought it after her husband died up north. She decided she wanted to be closer to her sister. This forced her children to come from a far distance to visit her, usually by ferry along the coast. On one of those trips down to the Lower Mainland Owen's parents decided instead to drive through BC's interior, thinking a road-trip might be

fun. Somewhere between Quesnel and William's Lake, fun turned to tragedy as a drunk driver smashed head-on into their car. Owen survived. His parents, no.

After two weeks of recovery, his youngest uncle was there to pick him up and take him back to his home. Said uncle lived with Owen's parents while working the docks until he could find a place of his own. Owen took a year off from school and was a half-year into it when his uncle died in a dockside accident. Owen had no desire to live with his Aunt Lily whose husband was a disagreeable sort and didn't think much of Owen. At that point, Owen felt he had no one else to turn to but wasn't quite ready to strike out on his own. Owen contacted his grandmother, whose sister had just been put in a home, about coming down to live with her. She agreed. Not long after his graduation, his grandmother's turn came up for a meeting with death, and Uncle Brute decided her house was going to belong to him, even though it was willed to Owen, who had no stomach for either lawyers or judges, let alone his uncle.

The apartment's main door slammed, breaking Owen's train of thought. Doc-Marten footsteps on corridor floor; KMFDM blasting through headphones. Owen knew who it was.

"Hey Marc. What gives? I thought you were with yer folks til tomorrow?"

"Oh, hi Owen", said Marc, holding a 2-4 of dry beer in one hand and a bag of taller bottles in the other. "Yeah, well, it's the same old shit, man. I should've known better than to go home for Christmas. My parents just couldn't stop complaining about me and my life. It was nag nag nag, bitch bitch bitch, complain complain, blah blah blah. I mean, isn't Christmas supposed to be a day of love and generosity?"

"Sounds like they loved to be generous with the scorn and disdain."

"That's about it, eh?" he said, laughing. "How about you, Owen? How was your day?"

"Alternating minor bouts of tranquillity and boredom, punctuated by fresh snowfall, good music, good tea, and a phone call, long-distance, from Carina."

"Carina? Where's that?"

"Fuck you. Carina called from Windsor."

"Oh, that Carina", Marc said with a huge grin on his face. "So, she called, eh? Anything developing between you two?"

"Are you serious? We've been an item for almost a month now. Where were you?"

"Well, there was a rock outside and it looked lonely, so I thought I'd go crawl under it and hibernate from the world for a while."

"Heh! Fun-nee! So, what's in yer dad's bag, considering for whom he works? Annything potable?"

"That depends on your definition of potable", he responded as he pulled out a large bottle of Bailey's from the bag.

"Ah, mother's milk, eh?"

Marc laughed and then pulled out a bottle of Frangelico, followed by Tia Maria, Advocaat, and a few others whose names ultimately eluded Owen.

"I see your dad absconded with much this Christmas. And that's your haul for the holidays?"

"One of the advantages of him being a distributor of this stuff."

"Isn't he supposed to retire soon?"

"He's semi-retired now. He gets access to a whole shitload of booze around this time but can't drink it all. This year he got more."

"Hmmm. Looks like a party to me."

"You may be right, Owen", he said, laughing.

Owen heard a key in the apartment door.

"What's yer story, boyo?" Owen asked Glenn. "I thought you'd be spending time with yer underage sweetheart, there."

"Well, I'm happy to see you too, Owen", said Glenn, "and a Merry Christmas besides."

"Yeah, Merry Christmas to you. You're home early."

Glenn merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Struck out, eh Glenn?" said Marc.

"Fuck you", Glenn said, smiling. He then tried to light a cigarette.

"Gee, what is it with the fuck-yous today?" asked Marc. "First Owen, now you Glenn."

"Oh yeah?" said Glenn, looking up, eyes wide open, lit cigarette dangling slightly from his mouth. His eyes zeroed in; a big grin formed on his face. "What's yer story, O?"

"He got a call from Carina", said Marc.

"You into ventriloquism now, O?" Glenn asked, smile still on his face. "Good imitation of Marc's voice there."

Marc just looked at Glenn, thinking, *"Fuck you"* pretty hard. "Well, I guess I'll take my extensive alcohol collection here and just go into my room."

"Here now, Marc", said Owen, "Let's not be too hasty on that. I'm sure Glenn would like a belt of something you've got there. Right, Glenn?"

Glenn's eyes brightened. "I haven't touched a drop all day."

"Now you've done it, Owen", said Marc, laughing. "I have no choice but to share now."

"Sweet!" said Owen.

As the evening progressed, the bottles' levels slowly went down commensurate with blood-alcohol levels going up. Lots of stuff was said, starting with Owen's recent love-capades. Owen maintained his optimism for his new relationship, daring to say it would outlast his time at university.

Glenn got pissed to the gills sooner than the other two did and became uncharacteristically talkative about striking out with this under-ager he'd been seeing, how he'd had a thing for Alexa all the while, how, in his head, this 17-year-old was supposed to be a sub-in, how he didn't know whether-or-not Alexa even liked him, how he didn't know how to tell her.

Owen and Marc just looked at each other and shook their heads over Glenn's reasoning. If they could share thoughts, the one word in common would've been "pathetic."

Glenn eventually passed out but not before warning Owen about going too fast. He also slur-apologized for having used Owen's Talkchat account.

"Bastard", thought Owen. *"That's what Alexa meant by 'my suggestion'."*

Owen decided he'd heard enough. A good night's sleep was in order.

Interlude

"Do you like the book you're reading", I asked.

"I think so", said Owen, addressing the book. "Good to see ye again."

"You, too. And how are you?"

Owen , part two

"Light. Nightmare. Hurts my eyes.

Move my head, my neck, my back. Try to comfort myself. Doesn't feel good. Don't like wherever I am. Preferred the state I was in before awakening: warm, secure, enclosed. Wasn't vulnerable there. Head's banging; 70 bpm, mebbe? Brain can't adjust."

He sought sleep once more. Thumps on wooden floors, child-speed running-steps.

Eyes slit-wide, someone's couch was under him, someone's thick blanket on him. He looked up, eyes widening a bit. "Robbie?" he mumbled to himself.

"Who's Robbie?" Lyne asked, bringing in a glass of water and a bottle of Vitamin-Cs.

"Mm, no one", said Owen, shaking his head a little. It was strange that he referred to a book he was reading in his dreams as "Robbie", seemingly in someone else's apartment, place and occupant unknown.

"Anyway, you're welcome to stay for dinner, as always."

Owen looked at Lyne strangely. He realized his math was off. "Oh, yeah, it is that time of the day, isn't it?"

"But just so you know, I'm making chilaquiles."

"Definition: Mexican hangover food. Gotta love it", he said. He rubbed the back of his neck, joints cracking, his neck early-spring ice on a Quebec river.

Dee-Dee had dragged Owen in from the cold, guitar case in hand, at four in the morning, or so he was told. Owen realized what he'd thought was the last half-day was instead a dream, one which troubled him. It wasn't uncommon for him to end up at a stranger's place following a major party and do whatever with whomever. But the dream he'd had made him feel like he was supposed to be somewhere else, with someone else.

"Best not mention this to Carina."

Owen thought he heard a child running, steps quick and close. "Brrrrrm, brrrrrm, brrrrrm." From down the hall came this little brown-eyed brunette cherubim-with-clothes and shot around the corner, toy airplane in hand. She got Owen in her sights and smiled.

"Pick me up", she said to Owen.

Lise came around the corner and spoke sternly to her daughter. "Mariss."

Mariss smiled at Owen and said, "Haaaiiii."

Owen thought that Mariss' presence put Lyne's mind a little more at ease, as well as changing things around their apartment, which had become laced with toys and colouring books, and where TV viewing had gone from soaps, sitcoms, & sci-fi, to Babar, Barney, and Bobinette.

Lise was one of many single parents at Concordia. Mariss had stayed with Lise since past September, with some weekends spent at father Chris' place. Lise said they'd review this arrangement in a few months. Lise wasn't looking forward to that. The father lived in Laval and Mariss was going to start kindergarten next September. He figured it'd be better if Mariss stayed in one place for a few years. And since Lise moved around a fair amount, and was likely to move again at the end of June, he figured it a better arrangement. She didn't agree.

Her argument for keeping Mariss around had been further compromised by Chris' concern about the company Lise kept. Lise had connections in the music industry and once worked at some creative-dampening major record label in the mid-80s before she was offered work at a small, independent place that eventually went belly-up in 1992. During that time, whatever place she lived in became a crash-pad for the odd indie-label band passing through town. Chris was enough of a dick about this that he figured it was time for them to split up and eventually take Mariss with him.

People still crashed on Lise's couch from time to time, which Lyne was cool with. This was one reason why Dee-Dee took Owen to Lyne's place.

Owen had been upright for a time and was okay but for the tam-tams playing in his head. He wondered if this wasn't merely a continuation of the show he and others had put on last night.

"Note to self: Cut down on mixing alcohol in the future. May prove deadly."

He told Lyne what had gone on the night before.

"That's pretty severe, Opie", said Lyne. "You need to watch yourself." She looked at him, concerned, and tried to smile but failed. "I'm serious. I don't want to lose you."

He swallowed two Vitamin Cs and drank some water. He attempted to lower his stress levels through slow, measured breathing – doing so had helped the past two times after a night of regret. Up jumped Tabou, Lyne's tabby, demanding attention, which was better than getting startled by Lyne's disagreeable ferret, Bob Gratton, who decided to stay in Lyne's bedroom and not venture outside today.

"Queen", Lyne said from the kitchen, card slapped down.

Owen thought he also heard a man's voice coming from the kitchen. Cat petted and contented, Owen got up slowly to go see who it was. Another card slapped followed by a hard knock on the table. The man smiled.

Lyne paused, four cards in hand. Owen recognized that pensive look on her face, one about to play a killer move. "Miss a turn, miss a turn, miss a turn, fini", said Lyne, rapidly slapping them down.

"Best two out of three?" asked Will.

Lyne thought about it for a few seconds. "Sure, why not. Aoh, look who finally decided to walk upright and join us."

"Yuk yuk yuk", said Owen. "Hey Will. You exist."

Will smiled at Owen.

Lyne and Will started their second game. Owen thought it humorous to add play-by-play commentary on the sly, speaking to Lise, who tried not to laugh.

"And it's down to the wire. Just two people: one woman, one man. They hold an equal number of cards. Her turn."

"Ey, Opie. *Ta gueule*", said Lyne.

"Doh-kay, doh-kay, I.R. quiet", he answered, smiling.

Lyne smiled back, but not before rolling her eyes.

As the evening wore on, Owen looked around Lyne's place, asking, "Hey, where's the rest of my gear?"

Alexa came into Lowlife's with two others in tow. Tony didn't know the guy by name but recognized him as one of Owen's roommates.

"Definitely not Marc. This roommate thing can get confusing at times", thought Tony, who immediately recognized the other person as Alexa's former cell-mate-in-rez and his until-recently fiancée, Debbie.

Owen waved them all over to where he, Tony, and Lyne were sitting. Tony wondered if anyone would miss Owen if he left this world quite suddenly.

Lyne looked mind-readingly at Tony and said *sotto voce*, "Oh, she's not that bad."

Owen found this all bizarre. He knew she didn't want to be alone but also didn't feel much like talking. He could pick up that Lyne was down in the dumps but he had no idea why. He hadn't seen her with Will since New Year's Day and assumed that Will was too busy.

Tony knew and thought it amazing that Lyne was able to muster up that much to say to anyone.

Lyne had assumed that all had gone well at Christmas dinner. However, she found out two weeks later that Will's mother wasn't impressed and didn't want him seeing her anymore. At first, he ignored his mother and continued seeing Lyne without telling her about his family situation. At some point, Will's mother remembered how to use her brain and decided to put him under schedule curfew, expecting him home whenever he wasn't in class, in the lab, or at the library.

He could've tolerated this for a limited time, if only it were about finishing his studies with high marks and avoiding any distraction. But these restrictions also put a crimp in what had become a social life for Will, which didn't sit well with him, and also threw a wrench into him seeing Lyne, effectively putting their relationship on hold.

In Lyne's mind, Will should've stood up for himself, but she understood that to live in someone's house meant to live by their rules and go with the times, and youth rebellion was no longer in fashion.

Lyne was willing to let go of Will's not telling her the whole truth about his situation, but she still felt like Will had failed her somehow.

Tony wasn't aware if Lyne had told anyone else within their nebula of friends.

"Hi, Sailor", said Alexa to Owen.

"Hi yerself", said Owen.

Tony looked at Debbie; she made eye contact with him. She then lowered her face. Owen thought this odd: Debbie tended to look at people in general from the end of her nose. Tony was the only person she'd never done that to. Now, there was the occasional looking away, though not to anyone else, but they always came back to each other – rather like in their relationship.

Debbie wondered why, no matter how many times she'd left Tony, she kept coming back to him. She also wondered what she could've been thinking in saying yes to an engagement. She knew she wanted to be with him but didn't feel she was ready for a long-term commitment, thinking maybe she'd jumped the gun where marriage was concerned. She wasn't sure she wanted to be single or with anyone else. She loved Tony. Every time she left him and went with someone else, she missed his company terribly. Feeling like nothing in life was permanent, she had apprehensions about committing, figuring she'd be let down in the end. But deep down she wanted to love and be loved. She felt that the real her couldn't appeal to anyone and so put on silly and ditzy airs to look and sound halfway interesting. The only person who'd seen and heard the real Debbie was Tony, and she was always running away from him.

Tony got up from the table and said, "Hey Jag! What's up?" in the direction of a table toward the other end of the café. As he left, he could overhear Owen subtly insulting-but-not-insulting Debbie. Owen never gave the full-frontal insult. As far as Tony could figure it out, Owen was the sort who could snag the marlin everyone else wanted to catch and reel it in at just the right speed, never snapping his rod.

"That's the only guy I know who can tell someone to go to Hell in a way that they'll actually look forward to the trip."

He began to wonder if he wasn't jealous of that. Another thing for later, he figured. Right now, he was too busy attempting to be somewhere else, notably around Jag, with whom he started chatting about student activism. On occasion, he looked back to where he had been, seeing Debbie standing there. On occasion, Debbie looked at him as well.

A pool table stood in their sightlines. It reminded Tony of how he'd first met Debbie: by accident and over a game of pool in a now-closed bar. She'd been particularly competitive in that game, which she won. He wondered how things could've gone wrong between them and then recalled how a former Cégep friend had cast doubts and aspersions on their relationship with his "expert" opinion on all things romantic. Once Tony put two and two together, he made it a point of no longer talking to this "friend", although he did hear about him on occasion from Owen.

"Owen got pretty wasted at Cees' party on NYE, from what I heard."

Debbie had left and Alexa had been glaring at Owen for a minute before by the time Tony decided to rejoin them. "That was rather mean", she said.

Owen just shrugged. "I wasn't in the mood."

Lyne was silent.

"Speaking of rude", said Alexa, "what was the idea of bugging out like that and leaving us all alone with Debbie?"

Owen lifted his eyebrows and smiled, almost laughed. "Now who's being mean?"

"Did she say anything about me?" asked Tony.

"No, but she looked a lot in your direction", said Owen. "Maybe she's more interested in ice sculptures. Y'know, someone more her type?"

Tony glared at Owen.

"She just needs to get serious", said Lyne, stirring from her silence.

"Will she ever?" asked Tony.

"Nothing's forever, dude", said Owen. "If she thinks she needs to get serious, then she will one day. I mean, we all gotta get serious sometime."

Alexa and Lyne looked at each other and smiled, probably thinking that Owen's statement should apply to Owen as well.

"I'll be in my office, if anyone wants me", said Tony, heading towards the washroom.

Owen leaned in and said, "Ten bucks says he'll meet up with her, strike out, but then get back together with her by the end of session."

Lyne smiled.

"Counter-proposal: 10 bucks says he'll strike out and that's the end of it", said Alexa.

Lyne let out a silent laugh. "Ten bucks says he'll succeed for good."

"Deal", said Owen.

Glenn just sat there and said nothing.

Lyne smiled at Owen. "We need to meet up with Carina, Owen."

Alexa thought that there must be something strange going on with Lyne. "She never calls him 'Owen' unless she's being deadly serious with him."

Owen smiled. "Right. Let's motor."

By the time Tony came back from doing private business, Alexa and Glenn had decided to be somewhere else. Tony stood alone – *"Last man standing"*. He looked at the pool table.

"Game?" said Debbie.

Tony took a deep breath, turned around, and then warmed up and smiled. "Depends. Will you let me win this time?"

She smiled. "Never."

Alexa couldn't figure out what was wrong with people. In her writing workshop earlier, people started laying into her about her work being too esoteric, too personal. In previous classes, they thought her writing was too general at times, too telling at others, even too fantastic sometimes. She hadn't really changed her writing style much, so she had to wonder what they'd been smoking.

"I wish they'd make up their minds about what's wrong with my writing. Maybe they all have alternating bad-hair days. Or maybe it's just me. Maybe I hate how cloistered and myopic things have become. It was great when I first arrived. But now? It feels like I'm getting into things deep, but I'm not sure if I like what I see. At least I'm not sleeping with any of the profs."

Cheap shots aside, she wondered what was the point of writing in one's own voice if one had to express it somebody else's way, often in a way she figured no one could really understand. She wondered why she should bother at all.

"What's a gal to do?"

She was with Glenn, in a capsule of cigar smoke, courtesy of the car's driver, who thought it too cold to roll down the windows.

"Hell is definitely not down below."

Alexa and Glenn had been at another party, which had dwindled to all of 10 people, including two guys, strangers each, sitting on the couch, trying to make small talk but managing no more than mono-syllabic utterances and the odd grunt of approval or acknowledgement. Alexa thought these two the most amusing at an otherwise dull party.

A classmate of Alexa's, Jessica, suggested crashing a little social gathering in Westmount, though she didn't state which part. Alexa didn't think they'd be heading into the stratosphere. Alexa didn't think much of Jessica – in fact, she couldn't stand her – but felt it important to play nice and stay connected to people who had money, and Jessica had money.

"Not her own money: Her parents' money. She's probably never worked a day in her life. She'd most likely be confused by the concept of work anyway. Still, connections."

Alexa also didn't feel like going along but didn't want to appear snobbish by turning down the offer. She also figured things would be a little more tolerable with Glenn around.

The little five-seater seemed to fish-tail more than drive on the wintry roads. The way Jessica's boyfriend drove, Alexa wasn't sure how they'd make it there intact.

The party turned out to be stuffier than the air in the car had been. Alexa figured on overhearing as many snooty and pretentious conversations as she could tolerate – fodder for her writing. By the time she left, she hadn't been disappointed.

Glenn stood around, smoking cigarettes, trying to ignore people. It didn't work. He occasionally got the attention of the odd toffy-nose who thought he looked like some too-cool undiscovered artist in search of a rich patron, namely themselves, albeit with their parents' money. Glenn pretended to tolerate them but this too didn't work: They seemed attracted to his pretences. He dealt with them by lighting another cigarette.

Alexa wished she had stayed at her place, where there was already a party in progress – Owen dubbed it the "Non-Valentine's Party". Dannie thought it an excellent idea to invite everyone, singles and couples alike, excluding no one. It was less V-Day and more party for party's sake.

What felt like an eternity later, Alexa signalled Glenn. Jessica saw them getting their coats and shoes on and asked what was up. Alexa and Glenn lied about getting fresh air and then left.

As they walked along this street or that, trying not to slip on the as-yet-uncleared sidewalks, Glenn often half-joked, pointing to this manse or that pile: "One day we'll live there." Alexa rolled her eyes at such half-jokes for the first while then laughed a bit afterward, and then later smiled fondly at Glenn whenever he said this, but by that point, Alexa thought Glenn was being more reasonable, as they were nearer NDG than upper Westmount.

"I don't know", said Alexa. "I kind of gave up on the notion of owning a house a while back."

"Anything is still possible", said Glenn, flicking his spent cigarette.

Alexa smiled. "Thanks. I guess I needed to hear that."

"No probbos."

Alexa stopped cold.

Glenn looked at her curiously. "What?"

"Oh nothing". She smiled. "Nothing."

Lyne was never late. Today, she didn't disappoint. She babysat Mariss before Lise's shift finished at 4, after which she and Owen had tea. They were both a little tense, which was how they both got when one of them had something to hide from the other.

"I heard Alexa got stuck at a party in upper Westmount", said Owen.

"Hopefully not at Will's?" asked Lyne.

"Apparently not. Some uppity's place near the Boulevard."

"How did she end up there?"

"Dragged out by someone else. I can't see her willingly going all the way up there."

"Oh, you never know. Maybe she got some good story ideas. Or humourous material. But yeah, it's a strange way for her to spend V-Day."

"Could've been worse. She could've been at our party."

"Is this about what happened with Allana?"

"Could be."

"That was silly."

"I'll say. I guess someone didn't read the story in the papers."

"Speaking of stories, did you hear Alexa just submitted one of her short stories to lit contest?"

"Oh, yeah. She calls it the 'Larry Award', or something like that."

"Yeah, something like that."

"Hm, good luck to her. She'll need it. I can't be bothered with it myself."

"You mean you have never entered?"

Owen shook his head.

Lyne thought about this for a moment, drank some tea, and then looked up at him. "Politics?"

He nodded. "Don't ask me what kind. All's I know is this: I'm not with the programme, so to speak."

"Crisse des caves."

"Ooh, such language", he said, forming a smirk on his face almost immediately. "Annyway, I've told Alexa not to bother with it. She'd have better luck with lit contests in the US, but she's determined to be as faithful to her university as possible. I can't fault her that."

Lyne nodded knowingly. She looked at Owen's hands. He was twiddling his thumbs a bit. "Spill it."

"Em, I have to inform you that Will is here."

Lyne froze for a moment. "Where?"

"In the back, with Tony. He came in about fifteen minutes before you arrived."

She looked at Owen suspiciously.

"What? I had nothing to do with it. He just wandered in."

"OK, I'll believe you this time", she said with a mischievous grin.

"Should I go get him?", he asked, thinking she was going to say no but her eyes giving away a yes.

Tony was watching a bunch of heathens playing Magic, probably wondering how it all worked.

"Anyone draw a Djinn yet?" Owen asked Tony.

"Huh?" Tony responded.

"I see you're a little fixated on this game."

"Nah, just curious", he said, fixated on the card game in progress.

Owen smirked. He occasionally looked toward the front and saw Lyne and Will talking to each other. Not much, but enough that Owen considered it a conversation.

Tony eventually broke from the immobility spell cast on him and turned his attention to this table and its guest. By the time this happened, Lyne and Will's conversation had become more lively. At times, Lyne raised her voice about something. Sometimes, surprisingly, Will followed suit in his own way, which, from what Owen knew, sounded to him quite inconceivable.

"So, what's their news?" asked Tony.

"Hard to say, rilly. I get sound bits from their direction, but nothing rilly audible. Still tryin' to hash things out, I reckon."

Tony thought about it for a second: "Ten bucks says she decks him and then leaves in a huff."

"A tenner says they make up, hug, and become friends", said Owen.

"Deal", said Tony.

Two seconds later, both Lyne and Will got up and hugged and said what sounded like a goodbye.

"You OK, Petite?" asked Owen.

She placed her right hand on his shoulder, smiled, and nodded. She then turned to Tony and placed her other hand on his right shoulder, smiling. "That's it for us, Will and I. Just friends."

"Friends?" Owen asked.

"Oui, friends", she said. "Did you forget to clean out your ears again?"

Owen smirked and then looked at Tony, who sighed, rolled his eyes, and dished out a \$10-bill.

Lyne laughed. Owen was happy to see that trademark sparkle in Lyne's eyes again. It had been too long.

"I'm lucky to have friends like the both of you", she said.

Feelings of impending doom hovered as finals approached. Overnight temp spike saw last week's lingering crusty snow-ice disappear. Most people had shed their winter cocoons in favour of lighter trappings.

He strummed and sang "Where did you sleep last night." It was the first song Owen tried to learn after his mom & dad bought him his first guitar. His grandmother handed him some records his grandad owned while he was alive. Though he didn't know what the lyrics meant at the time, he'd caught the groove of that particular Ledbelly song.

"Loved Kurt's version of it. Too bad neither of them're 'round to do an encore. There's still Mark's version."

He sat on a dry patch of concrete block by Loyola's campus centre, under trees just starting to bud. He knew blossoms would one day come – flowers, too – and the birds slowly return whence they'd been.

"Like a song you like, spring is here again."

It was one of those times in the year when Owen tended to run into everyone he knew if he stayed in one place long enough.

Debbie was wandering towards Owen when she noticed him talking to someone she didn't recognize.

"A grad reunion for a university? Never heard of that. I think I'll be lucky if I get a notice for a grad reunion from high-school. And that's coming up soon."

"Really? You're older than you look. My high-school grad reunion won't be for another five years."

Owen smiled at her. He went back to playing.

"Gotta go", said Nica. "Articles don't write themselves."

"Too true!" said Owen. "See ya around sometime?"

"Usually", said Nica, laughing a bit.

"Ciao Bella."

"Watch it", said Nica, leaving, "you're taken now."

"N" very happily so, thank ya very much", he said.

Debbie thought she recognized Nica but wasn't sure.

Owen almost forgot that Deb was sitting not too far away, listening attentively, looking happier than she had been prior to the non-Valentines party. He knew how much she appreciated music. He felt like giving her a whole recital.

"It's like music, for us both, is a first language. And since we both speak the same language, I wish I could tell her to drop the façade, the attitude, the posing, and just be herself. While the music plays, we know one another; outside of that, we're strangers. Pity."

He looked at her briefly, smiled, and started to remove his guitar. "Here."

"Oh", she said, a little perplexed, "I haven't played one of these since forever."

"Don't be shy. Play whatever comes to mind."

She strapped it on and played a little ditty he hadn't heard in a long while. She faltered a few times before giving up in disgust. "I used to be able to play that well."

"So when didja first pick up a guitar?"

"Tenth birthday. A gift from my parents."

"Same here."

"Yeah? Well, my dad actually gave it to me." She went all pensive for a moment before continuing.

"I can't forget that day. It was like today – sunny, warm, beautiful. Getting a guitar was, like, a turning point in my life. I realized I wanted to go into music – maybe go professional one day."

"But it didn't turn out that way."

"My dad encouraged me before, but..." She fell silent.

"But?"

She breathed out. "He was never actually there to give me my birthday present. I found it when I got home. While we were out at some restaurant – I don't remember the name anymore – he bugged out. His timing always sucked. Of course, I didn't really know what was going on until I noticed daddy hadn't been around for almost a week. And I haven't seen him since."

"But he does exist."

"As far as I know."

"So, it's this Saturday?"

"What's this Saturday?"

"Your birthday."

"This Saturday. Yeah. My birthday."

"Say, how'd ya like some guitar lessons?" Owen asked. "Free. No charge."

She laughed. "You'll teach me? Cool. One problem: I don't own a guitar anymore."

"Mm, yeah, but maybe one day you'll own one again?"

"It's possible."

"Til then, you can use mine."

"Sounds good. Owen?"

He looked at her inquisitively.

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

He shrugged his shoulders and started to play guitar – Respighi this time. "There's too much hurt in this world. We come out of the womb in pristine condition, and by the time we get out of high-school" – he played the last two bars – "we're damaged goods." He then looked at her with determination. "There's no sense preachin' Peace & Love in our generation, but at least we can all try to feel it somehow. OK, maybe I haven't always been at my best around ya, but I think I'm okay, and so are you. Anyway, I don't want to wax poetic too much here."

"Wax poetic?"

"Something hippies and beat-poets used to do."

"Ew. Hippies."

He snickered a little.

"So, do you have class?" asked Debbie.

"Na. My last class today ended over an hour ago. It's so beautiful outside now that I just didn't feel like doing any homework. It's just that kind of day, y'know?"

She nodded and smiled. "Yeah, it is."

"And you? Classes?"

She looked down at her watch suddenly. "Shit! I have class in five minutes. Sorry, Owen. Gotta go." She turned and started to go but then quickly turned and kissed him on the cheek: "Thanks, Owen."

He smiled.

Election time!

"It's been a year since the last brouhaha festival of political oneupmanship, and this time out it promises to be chock-a-block with accusations of this, that, and the other thing towards him or her."

Tony felt increasingly cynical about things.

This cynicism was offset only by a sense of happiness brought on by either an early spring or due to getting back together with Debbie. As far as he could tell, it was probably both.

He sat in Reggie's, at his usual booth, with an ever-increasing number of individuals, some from council, others from academic associations, and others still who were hangers-on, some of those left over from a much larger group from last year.

"Tony!" said Sol. "You're lost in your head again."

Tony looked at Sol strangely. "I'm like that since childhood. Anyway, I'm just looking around the place."

"Looking around the place means looking in more than one direction, my friend, and generally not into your beer mug", said Sol.

But Sol was right: There were too many things going through Tony's head. They were waiting for the all-candidates debates to begin, and for a change Tony wasn't up there preparing to tell the audience why they should give him another mandate.

"Nostalgia", said Tony.

"I think he means it feels strange", said M, laughing a little before drinking her scotch.

"First time being a student and not running? Yeah, strange sounds about right", said Angèle.

Tony looked at all of them and smiled. "Yeah, you all know me too well. Frankly, this feels like a retirement party for me. Not that that's a bad thing."

The others laughed. The banter about student activists and governments past and present restarted. Often it was Tony who drew the crowds. Even people who frequented Reggie's on occasion and liked a good story more than a rumour but less official than a newspaper article or press release came by whenever Tony talked up a storm. On a good day, Tony could hold court with as many as two booths and two adjoining tables full of people. This was one such day, which made it a good opportunity for people campaigning. Some of those were new to university, and to student activism in general, and had zero idea what they were getting themselves into, like the person who approached Tony's gang post-debates.

"Hi. My name is Troy, and I'm running for Council", chirped one newbie, figuring he'd struck gold with so many people gathered about.

"Ey, Tony", asked Sol, "how many of those have we had here today?"

"Try the last hour?" chimed in Angèle.

"Let us hear him out. So what are you selling today, young man?" asked M, smiling, her eyes soft but locked on Troy.

"Fuck'em", muttered a drunk Nico.

Troy felt a little threatened all of a sudden, not so much by Nico's muffled belligerence as by the cynicism and lines of questioning at this table. He decided to dive headlong into a presentation that was more poorly-rehearsed than wooden.

"Well", Troy started, "I believe that..."

Tony stayed barely tuned-in.

"He's droning on with the usual shit new cands naïvely think they can pawn off on us silly peons and peons-to-be. He's making a good go of it, though. He believes in what he's saying, I'll give him that. I'll wait til he's finished with his shitty little ditty before testing his skin's thickness."

"So", Tony started, the others around him looking at and listening to him. Their end of the bar seemed to go quiet in anticipation of what he was about to say. Even Nico cocked one eye up in anticipation. Troy got so tense that Tony could feel it: "Who are you supporting for President?" The music playing at the bar seemed to fade to an uncomfortable level. All that was missing was a spotlight shining on Troy.

"Ah", Troy sputtered, "uh, no one." He regained his confidence: "No one. I'm running independently."

"You're a first-timer for Council? And you're running independently?" asked Tony.

"Is that so important?"

"Not so important as surprising. Honesty: That's important. Be honest with yourself, be honest with your constituents."

"I feel I am."

"Maybe." Tony paused to sip his beer but then spoke into his mug: "Or maybe not."

At this point, Troy was getting a little exasperated. "You look like you're not buying any of this. I mean, I've just spent five minutes trying to convince you to vote for me, and I feel like I've been wasting my time. Are you guys apathetic or what? Don't you care about school spirit?"

"Relax, relax", said Tony. "There's no apathy at this end of the bar: It's Caveat emptor."

"Cav...?" asked Troy.

"Latin. 'Buyer beware'. You complained we weren't buying your spiel. Well, it's like with anything you buy: Why put money into a product you know nothing about? With elections, why cast a vote for someone who hasn't made a case for delivering the goods? Not that I'm accusing you of this..."

"I haven't had a chance to prove myself yet."

"Fair point. Okay, you say you're 'independent', so why do I sense you want to jump on someone's bandwagon? Call it intuition. Now, why would I – or even my friends here – want, in voting for you, to cast an indirect ballot for some presidential candidate we're not likely to support? Also, also, by your speech, I can tell you want to do lots of things for 'the students', but what about your faculty?"

"Oh", he interrupted, "I'll represent the anthropology students. I'm one of them."

"Firstly", Sol interrupted Troy, "anthropology isn't a faculty. It isn't even a department. And secondly, I should know: I'm one of them, too."

"I've never seen you before."

"That makes two of us", said Sol looking dead-straight at Troy.

"So", Tony came back in, "you have no idea how you're gonna represent your students, right? And I mean the students of Arts & Science. You know who I'm talking about? The ones who will vote for you. Or not. They are not just students from your program. I'm in economics; Angèle, too; Emmanuelle there – 'M' – is in political science; those guys and gals at that booth there are mostly in biology or biochemistry."

"Math student in the house!" came a voice from the other booth.

"Jaime there is in mathematics; Evy there is also in Science College." Tony smirked. "Nico, sleeping there..."

"Fuck yis!"

"...loudmouth though he is, and we all love him, is in English Literature; and you already know what Sol studies. You see, we're a pretty large and diverse faculty here. When you become a rep, you do more than just show up to Council meetings and say 'yessir, no mam, how high my liege'. If a student you don't know, from a department you didn't even know existed in your faculty, comes to you with a complaint against the university, or even the student union, you can't let political allegiances or philosophies get in the way. Your duty is to that student, providing he/she is being honest. And if the SU screws one of those small groups within your faculty, like what happened to the Psychology Students' Association last year, and the SU breaks its own rules, then your duty is to represent the group in question, even if that means going against the SU Executive who's your friend and authorized

the screwing in question." He turned to Marcie, who'd just brought him a shot of tequila, with no frills, and said, smiling, "Thanks."

"Wow. You sound experienced", said Troy.

"Yeah. My experience: idealism tested and, in most cases, proven effective", said Tony, downing his tequila and not flinching.

"Why don't you run for Council?" asked Troy.

"Been there, done that, ready to retire", said Tony, taking out a five and giving it to Marcie. "Keep the rest."

"Do you know who this is?" asked Sol. "Tony Béliveau-Picardo."

"You're Tony? From Council?"

"The one and only", said M.

"Can I count on your support?" asked Troy, smiling, excited, nervous.

"Did you not hear a single word I said? And the support of one man, and a soon-to-be ex-councillor?"

"You can get your friends to vote for me, can't you", said Troy, looking at the group around Tony.

"Look, uh, Troy, I don't tell these guys how to vote. That's how we are all still friends: respect for differences. And in case you didn't notice, I'm not on your campaign team. If I vote for you, then I — me, moi, io — vote for you. My support doesn't carry an additional 500 blind-faith votes with it. And, honestly, you still haven't given me a reason to vote for you. You make a good sales pitch, but can you deliver the goods when it counts? You spoke earlier of school spirit. Well, what's that? Hm? Some people think school spirit would be better served if we put on happy face buttons, or got lollipops during campaign period, and then remember that for the rest of the year while the SU sits on its collective ass and does sweet FA. I've seen 'school spirit' in action all too often: groups' funding is reduced; events get cancelled; orientation activities get curtailed severely; establishments like this keep bizarre operating hours. Then the SU blows what money it has, hiring an expert to tell them how to show students that the SU is spending their money responsibly."

"How about the SU hirin' another VP so it can do more for the students?" asked M.

"There's that", Tony responded. "Translation: The SU Prez gets to hire yet another friend to spend student bucks and get zero results. That lovely internet lab we were supposed to have?" he asked, thumb-pointing to Lowlife's cafe.

"Yeah. Great idea", said Troy.

"Yeah, great idea. Now let's see them do something with it."

"Well", said Troy, feeling like he was the proverbial moth to a flame, "nobody's perfect. It takes time to build these things. The studies, marketing research. And if people don't want it..."

"It's a fuckin' internet lab!" Tony bellowed. "They've been 'studying' this for over a year now! Maybe if they spent less time fucking around, wasting their creative energies on why they can't do something, and more of an honest effort actually working on the thing, it would've been ready at the beginning of this year. I swear to God that these types will one day work for some Prime Minister who'll promise everything at election time but then waste people's time later on telling them why it can't be done. Mark my words, this is coming. But back to you, Troy. Tell me honestly: Do you think, in all honesty, that it will even be built by this time next year? Be honest now."

Troy was shocked. He wasn't sure whether to answer yes or no. He stammered out, "I don't know. I... I'm sorry you feel that way. I didn't know it's been that long."

Tony stared at Troy for what seemed a very long time. He then picked up his mug but put it back on the table.

"You need to work on your presentation", said Tony, more subdued this time, continuing to look at his mug. "If you want to speak in front of people, you've got to realize that your audience won't always be your best friends. You can't freeze up. Be as honest as humanly possible, stand for something, and stick by it, even when everyone else disagrees." He looked up at Troy.

Troy gulped and then nodded a little and smiled before looking at everyone else and then departing, probably to look at what was supposed to be the internet lab at Lowlife's.

Tony signalled by hand for people to make no sound until a few seconds after the glass doors to Lowlife's were shut.

There was a slow-clap from the bar. It was Owen, who probably didn't care for Tony's hand signs. He'd been chatting with Marcie up until Tony decided to light a flame under Troy's arse.

"Bravo, el-Tonio, bravo", said Owen, smiling and looking to where Troy went, which was the washroom. "I'm sure he's gonna check his drawers ta see how just how much he soiled them." Owen looked at everyone else. "Sorry. Didn't mean ta be vulgar there."

Anyone who was listening broke out into laughter. Many of them had gotten a good chuckle out of Tony's tirade, but Owen delivered the punch line. They also had to be somewhere else, especially now that the debates had finished.

"Hey, Nico!" Angèle shouted in his ear.

Nico jumped to a start. "G'wan outta that, willya!"

Owen just looked at Nico stumble out of his booth, trying to walk after Angèle, and tried not to laugh. Nico could be funny when he was drunk.

"They make such a lovely couple. But seriously, man", said Owen, now one of two people occupying the booth, "that was quite the performance ye put on there. I knew I voted for the right guy last year."

"And the year before", said Tony.

"That, too."

"So Owen", asked Tony, "you remember last week asking me about that DJ you say is full of it?"

"Yeah, he plays commercial crap on the radio, calling it 'alternative'. What of him?"

"That's him over there."

"Where?"

"There."

"Wha? Handing out flyers n' shit?"

"The same"

"Ah. So he's a candidate for council now?"

Tony nodded. "But I bet you didn't know he's not your average student."

"Neither are we."

"Nah, nah, that doesn't count."

Owen thought about it. "A one-courser?"

Tony nodded. "And all to keep his student status." Tony drank his beer. "And you remember that group Gapstop?"

"That faux-punk flavour-of-last-semester that no one will remember five years from now?"

"The same. Remember which label they're on?"

"Yeht."

"He works for that label."

"He works for that label?"

"He works for that label."

"How do you know all this?"

"I asked him."

"Ask...?", Owen trailed off, thinking how easy it would've been to be more direct with the guy.

"Then again, it probably would've led to an argument, and I wouldn't have been able to that much info out of him."

"Oh. There's Roman", said Tony.

"Wha'? Would-be-writer Roman? And not very good at it either?" Owen said, perplexed.

"Cruel, but true. He's also running for council."

"D'ya remember him?"

"Well, he's also in one of my classes."

"Besides that. Ye remember that party last Hallowe'en at Marcie's?"

"Yeah."

"When Roman there dressed up as that clown with the four-colour neon wig?"

"Ah, yeah. He drank quite a bit that night, too."

"Well, that wasn't the end of it either. He put away more booze that night than I do in a week."

"Huh."

"And it didn't stop there. Nooo. Ol' Freaky Pagliacci there went out on the balcony and dropped a tab of acid." Owen swigged his beer. "And then the fun started."

"Oh-oh."

"He called himself 'Don Sensuale', or something like that, and went around kissing all the gals still at the party – some guys, too. Then!" Owen laughed. "Then, after almost everyone left, we were, like, in Marcie's living room, lounging around, chit-chatting about everything. At this point, we all thought Roman had left. But just then, the Scariest-Clown-in-Town came out of Marcie's bedroom – probably having practised autosexuality – and joined our little posse and started spouting all sorts of crude stuff, ranging from motorcycle faces to anal probes to condoms breaking to 'the love cow in the field'."

"Really?"

"And that was just the polite stuff. Annyway, we're gettin' tired o'this shite."

"Don't say that word, please."

"I never say the word 'please'."

Tony rolled his eyes.

"Annyway, so we look at each other and take bets."

"On what?"

"What he got tanked on."

"Did he tell you?"

"Sheeyah, he said 'life', and then went all tight-lipped after that."

"So you never found out." At this point, Tony was trying to maintain composure by neither laughing at nor getting grossed out by what was starting to sound like a disgusting story.

"He eventually coughed up the answer."

"He told you?"

"No, he coughed it up. Literally."

Tony smirked. "Couldn't hold all that booze?"

"Nope. And it didn't help matters that we all did this to him", Owen said, sticking his finger in his mouth.

Tony laughed a little despite himself. "Does he remember anything?"

"I ran into him a few days later. He remembers being hungover the next day. That, and he says he was, and I quote, 'a little goofy'."

"Little?"

"His words."

"How much did he have?"

"Dunno. Aside from the red wine or sangria – something red anyway – and that tab of acid, we suspect..."

"Suspect", Tony stated flatly.

"...he got into Marcie's vodka stash, judging by the empty bottles in her room."

"Her room, eh?" Tony said, grinning.

"And, uh", Owen looked a little oddly at Tony, "somebody said that the water in the toilet bowl was much lower than usual."

"Were there scratches on Roman's body?"

"A few, I think."

"Well he must have done it, 'cause he would've had to fight Marcie's cat for it."

Owen laughed. "Eh, too right, Tones. But boy was that one fried clown. Wanna see the photos?"

"You took photos?!?"

"Of course."

"Owen, have you no shame? How could you take photos of this guy when he was in such a state?"

"Simple. I can even show you how to use a camera, Tony."

Tony smirked at him again.

"It's hard to tell why he and Lyne broke up. Their senses of humour are so much alike."

Tony continued: "So, how did you know about the empty bottles in Marcie's bedroom? Did you go check?"

"Kinda."

"So, what time did you get home?"

"Uh, the next morning."

"The next morning? So you slept on Marcie's couch?" Tony couldn't help but grin again. He was rarely able to get Owen on the spot like this.

"Tony, really. Have you no shame?"

"Hi, Owen." It was Marcie. "Another pitcher?" she asked, smiling affectionately at Owen.

"Please", he eyed her much the same, even as she left them.

"I thought you never said 'please'."

"Shut up", Owen muttered.

"So, uh", Tony said, grinning dirtily, "what was she like?"

"Fucking amazing", Owen shook his head and muttered into his glass.

"Was she?" asked Tony, curious about Owen's subtle actions.

"No, you. You're fucking amazing for even asking that. What a guy."

Tony laughed. "Did Carina ever find out?"

"Ah, Tones, that was before Carina & I were an item. I'm not sure she'd care about what came before 'us'."

"Really? Hey, uh, Owen, there's something you should know about Carina."

"Oh-oh, look who's coming."

"Who? Carina?" Tony turned around to look. "Shit, it's Herman."

"You know him, too?" Owen asked. They looked at each other puzzled.

"Hey guys, mind if I join you?" asked Herman, empty beer glass in hand, having the nerve to pour himself the last of their old pitcher.

"What's up, Herman?" Tony asked. "Did they kick you out of your fraternity?"

Herman's face soured. "No", he answered defensively.

"Sorry, I thought you fraternity types hung around each other in school. So, ah", Tony looked around, feigning somewhere between curiosity and surprise, hands open then closed, "where are your brothers?"

"Uh, not here yet?"

"So you came to our booth to kill time, is that it? Or are you being the usual pain in the butt?"

Owen intervened: "Now, Tony, Herman is rarely a pain in the arse."

"Butt", said Herman, nervously, "Tony said 'butt'."

"But if he should get that way, I have in my bag", Owen said, eyebrows raised, smiling, pointing to his satchel, "a roll of duct tape and a ball of twine, though he has to mention Elvis first."

Herman's eyes went wide. "Uh, I just remembered where I'm supposed to be, and it's not here. See ya, guys", said Herman, slamming back his mooched half-pint and leaving.

Tony looked at Herman scampering off, amused at how that all played out. He then looked intently at Owen and smiled: "Duct tape? Twine? Elvis?" He started laughing.

"Long story. Something out of Cégep."

"I'll be sure to make the time one day."

"What's his story with you?"

"Also a long story."

"Sounds like another pitcher."

Tony smiled.

"Where's your friend?" Marcie asked Owen, new pitcher on cue, still smiley-eyed.

"Oh, he was late for work", Owen responded in kind.

"What? He works? Doing what?" Tony asked, perplexed.

"Sits in cars", answered Owen. "Crash-test dummy."

Tony couldn't help but laugh.

After Marcie left, laughing, Owen changed the subject. "Say, Tony. I hear Deb's birthday is coming up soon."

"Who told you?"

"Alexa mentioned it a while back. And I ran into Deb earlier today. So, you takin' her someplace special? Or will that be a surprise this year?"

Tony looked at Owen quickly. "Yeah, yeah! A surprise! Owen, you're a genius!"

"Well, you know, I needed a good follow-up after inventing the question."

"What?"

"Heh. Still works. So what surprise?"

"A surprise party."

Owen almost swallowed his beer down the wrong tube. "Sure. Where?"

"My place. My parents will be out of town that weekend."

"Perfect."

"You'll come, right?"

"Tony, I'll even help set up. Should I bring my camera, too?"

"Great idea."

"Music?"

"But no DJs please."

"Clowns?"

"Eh, no."

Lyne liked the idea of having a party for Deb and decided she was going to dive right into organizing it, no matter who objected. She welcomed such a party after the student victory against the provincial government over tuition fees. The celebrations at Reggie's weren't enough for her.

Chia told Owen that she was up to playing an acoustic set this Saturday for a birthday party, so they had to practice again. Glenn, Lise, and Dannie all loved surprise parties, no matter who they were being thrown for. Even Alexa had no problem with it. In fact, she was uncharacteristically receptive to the idea – not a note of sarcasm from her.

But now Owen had a problem: He had to track down Allana. Finding her was actually the easy part, but trying to talk to her once he found her was another matter altogether. Ever since the Non-Valentines party, there'd been a cold front between them. Allana had tried to set Carina up with someone, not realizing she was already with Owen at the time. Owen figured it the sort of honest mistake made possible by good intentions, but he wondered why Allana hadn't asked Carina what was happening.

"Like, why the supposition? What is it with some people thinking it's a sin to ask questions? I mean, we're at university, right? That's where people ask questions."

He figured at the time he'd been more put out than steamed; that it wasn't like Allana was out to get him or anything. Before V-Day, he'd only seen her around once or twice and hadn't said anything to her that might have been deemed offensive by any stretch. He figured that he'd have to deal with all this later. For now, he had another task to perform.

Allana and Debbie were sorority sisters and were fairly close besides. It probably would've been a slight to have a party for Debbie and not invite Allana. If Owen didn't contact Allana, she might interpret it as petty vindictiveness. Owen didn't really care what Allana thought, but he preferred to avoid confrontations or heated debates unless he absolutely had to. This wasn't one of the times he had to.

For now, Owen's biggest apprehension was that Allana had planned something else for Debbie that evening. To find out, there was only one way.

Owen got to the TESL centre where Allana worked part-time, hoping she was still on shift. He walked in and sat down in the chair in front of the reception desk. It took about half-a-minute before she even realized he was sitting there, looking at her.

"Hello", he said, faking a smile.

"Oh, hi", she said, as if he'd flicked cold water on her face while she was sleeping.

"Busy?"

"On hold. They called me, then put me on hold immediately."

"Boggles the mind. Muzak? Or public-service announcements?"

"Muzak. The Beatles, I think."

"It's always the Beatles, I think."

She smiled. Her expression then changed and she returned to speaking to whomever was on the other end. To Owen, it seemed like a business call, and this despite the rather unorthodox start.

"Well", she started to say, a little tensely, "what can I do for you?"

"Deb's birthday. Are you aware of how soon it is?"

"Yeah. This Saturday."

"Planning anything for her?"

"Maybe."

"How certain is 'maybe'?"

"Maybe maybe. I don't really know. What are you playing at, Owen?"

"Surprise party for Deb at Tony's place, this Saturday evening. Can you go? Can you help set up? Can you keep it a secret?"

"Um, yes. Yes. And yes. But why...?"

"Why not? Once again: Are you in?"

"Sure."

"Secret?"

"Secret."

"Alright. Here's the address."

She looked at the piece of paper Owen gave her. "This is in the east end."

"That's generally where one finds St-Michel South."

"OK. I'll just bring my car instead of taking the metro."

"Whatever gets ya there and back. If ya wanna help set up, 4pm's the time."

"Okay." Allana had a look of disappointment on her face, feeling she was roped into this whole affair. Owen wasn't sure whether-or-not to care at this point.

"Annyway, gotta go. Bye-ee!" said Owen.

Allana looked curiously at Owen as he left. She had the feeling she was never going to understand him, even in the slightest. She wondered why Carina was with a square peg like him.

Everyone in Owen's nebula of friends and colleagues at university had something about them that said "square peg". Even Tony and Debbie had back-stories that never quite smacked of "normal".

Owen thought about them all, their tendencies, their situations. He wondered what was normal; how everyone he'd ever met in his life was screwed up in some way; how people spent too much time making little differences into major schisms; and how there was enough drama in life.

He was happy. Debbie loved the surprise party. Everyone who helped organize it was content to let Tony take credit for the whole thing.

"Hopefully they stay together this time."

Owen realized that was a rather dick-ish thing for him to think.

The general store facing the Tim's on the 117 in Val-David was where the intercity bus had let Owen and Lyne off. There was a young man who wore many hats in his day-to-day: cashier, seller of bus passenger tickets, and keeper of sacred parcels, both leaving and arriving.

Something about Val-David reminded Owen of a high-school ski trip up to Whistler, before development took hold. Val-David, nestled within the Laurentian Mountains, was just down the road from the Mont-Tremblant ski resort, also quite developed. He and Lyne went skiing together there while still a couple. Owen had been out of practice but, after falling down a few times, eventually got the hang of it. During that time, he had this wild notion of one day moving there and opening a bed & breakfast. He'd never gotten the opportunity to tell Lyne about this: They broke up two months later.

Lyne and Owen sat outside on a bench in the sun, waiting for Lyne's mom to show up. The last time they'd arrived by bus, Francine was waiting there for them. This time, however, she'd been delayed in leaving the house, about 20 minutes outside Val-David.

"She's on her way", said Lyne, hanging up the payphone after talking to her dad, Cédric.

The young man working there reminded Owen of someone he once went to school with, Vince, whose family owned a gas station and store at Truman's Corners, just down the road from where Owen had once lived. He began to wonder about people he'd known from his old high-school,

particularly Vince. Owen sometimes looked at this young man here in Val-David and noticed how he seemed never to forget people's names, again like Vince.

Bus gone and last package sorted, the young man dealt with a waiting customer inside. Owen couldn't resist asking Lyne about this guy.

"Have you known him for a long time?" asked Owen.

"We went to high-school together", said Lyne, matter-of-factly.

Owen smiled at the coincidence of it all.

"There's a Vince in every small town."

Lyne smiled at him, curiously. "I guess Carina's back in Windsor with her family?"

Owen sighed a bit. "Yup."

He preferred not to dwell on Carina's absence. He wished he could be with her. Before leaving, she'd commented that Owen might feel like a stranger in her family. Owen thought this was odd but let it slide without response.

Owen never felt the stranger in Lyne's family, except maybe at the beginning, but then again, it generally took him some time to find his niche in any social setting. Others in Lyne's family weren't sure how to approach him at first, but things got better as the evening wore on. Alcohol helped, too.

Francine had once worried about Owen getting put off by the odd joke at the dinner table. This stopped once Lyne explained to her that people in Owen's family used to engage in that kind of humour – 'healthy slagging', as Owen once put it – and so Owen was accustomed to it, albeit in another language. Francine was still a little concerned. She was the sort of person who wanted to make sure everyone who visited her felt welcome.

Although Owen had had other francophone women in his life before Lyne, she was the first to have him over to meet the family, and this during a holiday. Two years after they broke up, Owen felt he'd come around full circle in the social awkwardness department.

He couldn't recall any awkwardness last year but then remembered that particular long weekend as one long blur starting noon on Thursday and carrying on til after brunch on Sunday. It was the last big hurrah for the ABC group, and he needed this: Alexa had decided to break up with him the weekend prior, claiming he hadn't paid enough attention to her.

Lyne had never had a problem with the ABC, but Alexa never really understood them, at least those of the core group. Alexa was never impressed with poetry-slamming, staccato-rapping MC Isa, nor with singer/song-writer Annie the Dreamer, although Annie's tendency towards extreme sensation sports did raise Alexa's eyebrows at least, scare her at most. She couldn't clue into where DJ Jessie was coming from, although she did like it whenever Jessie brought around Banh Mi sandwiches. She thought Philippe the Storyteller was a loser, though by all accounts she was probably stunned by how well he played with words and made turns-of-phrase and didn't appreciate the competition. She thought Claudia was a space-case with no redeeming qualities, although she secretly wished she could approach Claudia and learn what made her tick and how to live as Claudia did, namely without hang-ups. Owen was afraid to tell Alexa to lay off criticisms of Mark due to his having had a rough life: Owen knew how Alexa would react to that.

Owen was confused by Alexa's reactions to the ABC core. He thought she'd fit right in, being an aspiring writer, and yet he was surprised that Alexa never mentioned this to others and shushed him once when he wanted to bring up the subject. Upon further reflection, Owen realized that Alexa was fairly leery of groups not of her own creation.

Unknown to Owen, Alexa did like what she'd heard coming out of ABC but would never cop to it. However, she also felt that she didn't want to go along with anyone if she couldn't see an exit sign somewhere. Owen wondered if Alexa was trying to control who his friends were. Around this time, Alexa's father resumed his long-distance harassment, making her feel like she was in control of nothing. Owen thought he was being helpful yet up-front when he said to her that he didn't like having to choose between friends and lovers. Alexa didn't know why Owen had said that but felt she'd seen the exit sign of their relationship.

Lyne had seen how things were deteriorating between Owen and Alexa but was loathe to interfere – she thought each did wrong in some way. At the time, Lyne's relationship with Tony had gone south when she found out she was merely a between-Debbie rebound, so she'd had enough on her

emotional plate to deal with without managing the plate of spaghetti that Owen and Alexa's relationship was becoming. Lyne hung around the ABCers for a time, feeling grounded, especially around Devil-may-care Danny, much to the resentment of his girlfriend, Isabelle (MC Isa). Lyne did a slow fade-out after that.

Alexa hadn't been wrong about Owen and the ABC: They had taken up much of his time, and Owen knew this. He felt both nostalgic and melancholic somehow about that part of his past. Most of them had gone their own ways after graduating from university June past, leaving only Owen with a qualifying year to do and Chia to start a graduate diploma, though Claudia was still around and stayed in touch with Owen. Over the next few months, a nebula of various types he'd gone out with or had become friends with from other areas of university into and out of which he'd drifted had formed organically, much like the ABC had been. He wondered if this nebula represented a surrogate group for the ABC, each current friend playing an earlier someone else's role. He had to admit to himself at some point that so many people parting company from him at once made for a very large hole in his social life.

"No one could ever take the place of those I knew. How silly would it be if every new group I've ever hung out with were only a replacement for a group that came before. Where would it end?"

Someone who didn't particularly like Owen once said that Owen liked to surround himself with lots of people to make up for his lack of family. Defending Owen, Philippe from ABC shot back saying the detractor said such things to make up for his lack of compassion. This detractor had amused Owen who tried to imagine who were the parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles. After more thought, he realized this idea wasn't so far-fetched. It was sad.

"Owen." Lyne snapped him out of his reverie. "There is probably something you should know about Carina. I don't know how to put this. She..." Lyne perked up all of a sudden. "She's here."

Out came a woman looking like a mid-40s version of Lyne but with darker hair. They hugged and spoke a little. Owen felt a little self-conscious about returning to Lyne's parents' place. He'd felt this way once before while they were together and things still went over well. He felt accepted by Lyne's family. In the present, the feeling was no less different, even though they'd broken up a while ago. Francine liked Owen, as did Cédric, and they both felt that Owen was welcome at any time. He still felt it a little strange to be back at his ex' parents' place for a family event.

He looked at Lyne, who was sitting in the front passenger seat, talking up a storm with her mother about the bus trip up and how things were going in school. She asked about this family member or that, particularly her brothers and their families. At some point, Lyne turned to Owen and said in English, "There'll be a lot of family this year. I hope you don't mind."

"Sounds cool", said Owen. "You won't be offended if I accidentally forget a name or three, will ya?"

"Of course we will, and you will be severely punished for it later. You will have to clean all of the horse shit out of the barn", said Lyne, who then turned and winked at Owen.

"Marjo! Stop fooling with him!" said Francine in French.

"Relax, Mom. It's only a joke, y'know. He knows it", said Lyne, likewise.

"It's all good", said Owen, laughing. He knew he was going to have a good weekend.

Owen had this crazy dream that Carina was about to leave him for good and that others had tried to warn him about this impending break-up. In his dreams, Owen laughed at this idea, feeling that he & Carina were serious, and how Carina going back to Windsor would only be a temporary thing, that they'd see each other again. In his real life, he was never one to break things down and analyze them, although there was that one time last December with Lyne – she put paid to all that. With Carina, he didn't want to contemplate even getting to that state.

This bizarre dream followed a fantastic evening with Carina. Just the two of them. No gang. They'd found a bring-your-own-wine resto and ate, drank, talked, and lost track of time. Bar drinks followed, then dancing. Moonlit walk preceded a night-bus back to Carina's place, where she pulled Owen into her room and closed the door.

Senses bombarded by sound and smell of breakfast cooking, he got out of bed. He knew he'd slept very well but was troubled by another dream he'd had: a flashback to his early-to-mid teens, the time of the accident. He never showed it, but losing his parents had troubled him since then. He'd once

heard that dreams were the mind's way of sorting things out. He figured on having a ways to go before he could sort out many things in his life.

He got up too fast, head reeling. He was trying to adjust to reality but his brain wanted to go on strike, needing more time for leisure activities, like sleep.

He looked to his side but saw that Carina wasn't there. It was a sign of something to come: Tomorrow, back to Windsor she'd go.

The tell-tale odour of bacon, sausages, eggs, home-fries, and coffee (perhaps espresso) wafted towards him. He decided to follow those pleasant morning smells.

"I was wondering when you'd get up", said Carina, who didn't bother to turn around.

As Owen approached, he could see a smile forming on her face. He could also sense a certain glow about her.

"G'mornin' to ye too", he said, placing his hands on her shoulders from the back, giving her a peck on the side of the neck.

"Would you like your eggs over-easy or sunny-side up?" she asked in a slightly exasperated fashion.

"Over-easy, Love", he answered.

A few seconds later, Dannie's voice loud and clear: "Hey, Owen!" Then she let out a wolf-whistle and said: "Nice bod. Thinking about modelling in the nude someday?"

Owen wondered what the heck Dannie was talking about. Then he looked down and realized there was something he'd forgotten to do before leaving the bedroom. At that point, he figured if Carina didn't mind, then neither did he.

He managed to robe himself in time for Alexa to come back. She shook her head, looking at Owen. She knew what had happened prior to her arrival. She'd been at Owen's place, having spent the night with Glenn there.

"Did you at least get him drunk first?" quipped Owen.

Alexa laughed as she normally did. "No, there was too much alcohol in the house."

"That much of a lush, eh?" quipped Dannie.

"I wanted him willing, not passed out", said Alexa, sounding somewhat disappointed.

"And?"

"I got him willing, and then he passed out."

"No after-sex ciggie for him, eh?" asked Owen.

Alexa gave Owen a puzzled look. "He does that?"

"Not that I would know from personal experience, of course. Just stuff that I've heard."

"I'm sure."

Carina laughed. "Owen! Do you want breakfast or not? I can wait, but I don't think it will."

Early morning. Pre-dawn. What remained of the group was in fine form, considering that none of them had to be carted into bed. They were hammered enough from going out that they felt like the sort of houses in a nice, older neighbourhood, leaning up against one another to keep from falling down. They'd all had a blast. They didn't get to party this way often. Then again, it wasn't every day that they were about to graduate from university.

They'd cabbled it back from the corner of Sherbrooke and St-Laurent, after having seen off Tony & Debbie, who headed back to Tony's parents' place, as well as Marc, who'd disappeared into the cityscape at some point before that. Lise had to be home for Mariss.

They were too worked up to go to sleep, which was strange considering the amount of alcohol they'd put away. Once back in NDG, Alexa offered them coffee and cookies. Nobody could refuse that.

As Owen entered their apartment, he saw in his mind images of what had been. He became melancholic, which wasn't a good state to be in while drunk. He entered the kitchen. Familiarities: the cupboard which housed the tea mugs; the old-fashioned big kettle, perfect for any stove; the heavy wooden chairs, all mismatched, in which he'd sat to study; the table where he'd studied and eaten with an all-too-familiar someone.

In the living room, Dannie, Lyne, and Allana were sitting on the couch, the same couch that Owen had slept on the night after Carina's departure. He looked at the walls, where much of Dannie's

artwork was still hanging, including a new half-nude. He looked into where Glenn's studio was and noticed how well it had been set up. One month prior, Owen had made love to someone in that very same room. Alexa had just finished preparing coffee. Owen felt the kitchen was a better place to be in.

"Need any help, Alexa?"

"Mm, no, not really", said Alexa. "Homesick?"

"I look 'omesick?"

"For this place."

He looked out to the back balcony, recalling how he'd felt nothing while either a country or a couple looked like they were going to break up. Thinking about all those memories was yet another thing to keep Owen from parsing out what was happening between him and Carina, which wasn't anything really, and perhaps what might happen, which Owen feared but hoped wouldn't come to pass. But Alexa was right: "Yeah, 'omesick. Sher."

Alexa looked at Owen curiously and decided she didn't want to be around him when he was in this state. "Um, I'm gonna go check on the others. Just wanna see who's still conscious."

He nodded then smiled. "Better check on Glenn while ye're at it. You know how he can't handle his liquor."

"Yeah, good idea. He's probably passed out by now."

"Ya think?" He laughed. She left. He made sure she was out of sight before opening up the cupboard door. He took a cup quite instinctively; by chance a cup he'd drunk from a number of times in the past. Holding it in his hand now, he could remember holding it some months back as someone else held his other hand. He remembered how it used to hold tea, not coffee. But that was then. He replaced the coffee pot with his cup under the machine's basket, filling it up. After putting the pot back in its place, he slipped out to the back balcony.

"My favouritest place in the whole wide world."

There he stood, cup of coffee in hand, looking to the east. The sun was coming up over the horizon, making things officially the morning after the night before, hangovers to come. He imagined having this view at this time of day with Carina while she was still in this apartment, but that opportunity had never arisen.

The balcony door slid open. "Hey, O!"

"We hafta stop meetin' like this, D", said Owen.

"Yeah, or at least change the meeting place", she said, hugging him. "So, why the solitude?"

"Mm, contemplatin', I guess."

"Yeah, beer'll do that to ya."

He sighed. "Sorry. I guess I'm not much fer talkin' right now."

"Ya mind if I talk?"

"Go fer it."

She looked to the east. "Look at that sunrise. Beautiful!" she said with energy uncharacteristic for someone who'd had much to drink. "At one time, if ya woke up and saw the sun and blue skies, you could bank on the whole day being like that. Same for if ya saw rain and clouds – the whole day like that."

He looked at the sunrise while she was saying all of this. After she finished, he glanced at her, raised his eyebrows a bit, and shrugged his shoulders.

"But now", she continued, "if ya wake up and see the sun, ya don't know if it'll cloud over and rain from noon 'til dinnertime, and then clear up when night falls."

"Mm, yeah. Poetic."

"Yeah, it is." She turned and looked at him. "Cuz that's kinda like what life is like these days. Nothing's sure anymore."

He nodded, resigned.

"Back in New York over the last month, I checked out possible jobs there."

"And?"

Dannie told Owen of some disappointing or unpleasant experiences she'd had while job-prospecting, telling him that either there's no room for advancement or one goes underground; that there's no room for improvement or somebody'll get busted for something. She said it was all probably

temporary but at a bad time. She despaired of the idea that her options were pretty limited but said that something else happened while she was in New York.

"Y'mean, like, there was a hold-up and no one got shot or killed?"

"*Insençato*", she said, squinting at him. "No. While checking out these places, I sized alla them up, noting what they had and lacked. So, when I get back, I'm gonna start my own business – make my own work, be my own boss. So if ya wanna job..."

"Mm, what if I want to be my own boss?" he said, squinting at her.

"Ooh, competition."

They laughed.

"What're ye gonna do?"

"Not sure yet." She beamed, lightning thought. "Oh! OK. Picture it. OK? Two-level coffee shop with a split-level entrance and artwork on the walls – mine! uh, and other friends'. One level's got internet computers, the other's got a small stage for poetry readings and live acoustic shows – yeah! oh, but completely within city noise limits. Don't want the cops to shut me down."

"Hold up: Internet computers? What? You're gonna tap into a nearby university? There's no commercial internet out there."

"Tells you what you know!"

Owen raised an eyebrow. He didn't know this. "Hmm. Sounds great! Mebbe I'll come 'n' work for ye."

"Mm. I'm not so sure now." She stopped and then looked at him. "Mm. I'll have to think about it." She pretended to think about it once more. "Mm. OK... maybe."

"Haha. Hey, Rockefeller, where're ye gonna get the cash to start yer little enterprise?"

"First Bank of Father."

"Ah, so yer dad's got cash? Sweet!"

"Yeah, well, he saved up for my education but didn't spend the moolah on me."

"What did he spend it on, if ye don't mind me askin'?"

"Nothing yet, and that's why I'm gonna hit'im up for the dough now."

"Stop me if I'm gettin' too personal here, but how'd ye get through university this year?"

"Let's just say I owe the government a lot of money."

"Student loans?"

Dannie nodded, smiling, and then knitted her brows.

"So why didn't yer old man spend the money on you? I'm just curious."

"Ah", she said, smiling, "he wanted me to go into Law. I went into Studio Arts. Get it?"

"Uh huh. Y'know, that's not much different from Deb's story, 'cept that she complied."

"Yeah, I know. She told me at the Non-Valentines party. I worked with her during the last few months to kinda help her 'recapture her glory days'." She glanced at him curiously. "That was a good idea you & Carina had, that party."

"Yeh, it was. Allana and I were talking about that evening last night."

"Yeah, I saw ya two talkin' last night outside a' the Campus."

"Mm, we kinda cleared things up between us. Good thing, too. She's good people. She jist hadda open her eyes 'n' ears a little more. 'Sides, it's pretty difficult fer me t'be miffed at someone forever."

"Yeah", she said as she smiled, "and that's what I like about ya, O. Nothing's forever with you."

He smiled, but it turned to a frown when he recalled many things in his life that didn't last forever.

"Especially", she continued, "the bad things. They don't last forever."

"Yeah", he said, nodding, and smiled again. "Just as well that Carina'll be due back later today. Maybe forever'll end then."

Dannie went quiet. "I hate to tell ya this, O, but I don't think Carina's coming back. I mean, I haven't heard a thing from her since she moved away. We promised to keep in touch. So far, nada. And there's something else."

Owen looked curiously at Dannie as she went back into the kitchen and returned with a book, one on modern British art – he didn't want to know if the poem he'd written for her was still inside. He nodded in resignation. "Yeh, I figured as much. Somehow I've always known. Y'know, I had a dream the night before she left. She wasn't in my life anymore. This confirms it." He sighed. "I do miss her."

"I know."

"I was willing to go the distance with her. I've loved every woman I've ever been with, but her, she was different. I'd've given up almost everything for her."

Dannie smiled, eyeing Owen up and down, and let out a little laugh. "I've never seen you like this before."

"I know. Pathetic, eh?"

"No. Endearing. Your walls down. The real you." She smiled at him warmly and hugged him tightly.

"Owen Niall Powell, With Distinction, Honours in English Literature, Department of English, Baccalaureate in Arts."

The Rector shook hands and ceremoniously capped him. Between his first step on stage and being capped, Owen could remember nothing.

Walking off the stage was another matter: Owen waved rockstar-like to the audience, getting applause in return; the only person to get more applause than Owen was Tony. He walked past all manner of post-graduate garb belonging to the profs on stage, one of them even resembling England's Henry VIII.

Tony, Alexa, and Lyne, among others, sat in the audience, degrees in hand, waiting for the list to run out at "Z", and couldn't wait to go for brunch. With Owen coming to join the audience, they had a ways to go yet.

Debbie, Allana, and Marc were scheduled for the afternoon ceremony, though they were all in the audience, all equally hungry. Similar to Glenn, Dannie, and Lise: ceremony tomorrow; hungry today.

Will didn't seem to have this problem: He was nowhere to be found, and nobody knew what had happened to him. If Lyne knew, she said nothing and seemed unconcerned.

Carina never did show up the afternoon following the big night out. Owen had no illusions of her being present for her ceremony.

One Mrs. Carlson and her daughter Audrey were also in the audience. They were Alexa's mom and sister and quite the surprise for Alexa. They showed up the day before without prior notice. Irene had accompanied them and they arrived while Owen was visiting Dannie about a painting. Alexa wouldn't say it, but she appreciated her friends being there at that moment. She felt a little less alone.

As he descended the stairs on the other side of the stage, Owen felt as if he'd crossed a threshold of sorts. He imagined Lyne having felt this way when she passed here earlier. He knew that Francine and Cédric were in the audience. Owen wished his parents could've seen him get his degree and wondered what they would've thought, had they lived to see this day. Certainly, he could've had a photo with them but was surprised to see that he could still have a photo with a family member.

"Now what'd yer ma tell ya 'bout gawkin'?" It was Aunt Lily. "Well, I suppose I'll have to look up to ya now that ya're a 'Bachelor'."

Owen smiled, hesitantly. He scanned around quickly for his uncle.

"He's not here", said Lily. "I'll explain later."

"Maybe over brunch? I'm a hungry 'Batch'. Care to join us? Or is it your turn to gawk?"

Brunch saw the table divided into generations: Lily, Irene, and Mrs. Carlson on life in ever-expanding burbs of their big cities, owning new pets, and the loss of a spouse; and Owen, Alexa, and Audrey chatting about music, relationships, and skateboards. Between those sat everyone else.

Owen learned that his Uncle John had died the previous fall, around the same time as Alexa's dad. Lily bought a puppy of five months at the time, took it out for walks, and got out to see the world around her, occasionally interacting with other humans, if only for small talk or short conversations, things she hadn't really had while John was alive.

Mrs. Carlson opted for a cat, which she named "Lulu", to keep her company. Her beliefs, less obvious and more subdued now, helped her get through the tough days. Alexa and her mother agreed to patch things up and stay in touch regularly.

By brunch's end, Owen was still curious as to how Lily had learned about his graduation ceremony. He hadn't cause to send her anything, having been out of touch with her for years. And neither she nor John would've cared for him being at university, his uncle feeling that anything beyond high-school was putting off responsibility. He didn't think it wise to go full-spec at this time.

Lily turned to him and said, "I'm proud of ye, Owen."

Owen felt a little stunned but rolled with it.

"And I know yer mother'd be very proud of ye. Yer father, too." She hugged Owen. She smiled at him. She hadn't really smiled in a long time, but it didn't feel difficult on this day. "Ye have somethin' waitin' for ye back home, something ye've been needin' t'deal with for a long time."

Owen went cold. He knew exactly where this was going but didn't even want to deal with it later, let alone think about it now.

She looked him up and down. "By Christ, ye've grown tall enough."

"Well, it has been a few years."

Owen, alone, sat at a St-Denis bar-terrasse.

"Not truly alone. Where did all the time go? Fifteen years ago, back in junior high-school up in Prince Rupert, I couldn't have imagined myself sitting here in Montreal, not feeling guilty for having so much time to myself. I couldn't have imagined then learning all that I know now."

He sat there with the bar's copy of the Globe and Mail on the table, a newspaper he hadn't bothered to read since his unfortunate break-up with Lyne two years prior. It could've been mistaken for a placemat. He wondered why he took it in the first place. He had other things to consider.

Owen had made his choice for grad school. Four schools had accepted his applications. He settled on doing English Literature and staying in Montreal. U de M was his choice. It had a small English department with a good reputation. Before Lyne went on vacation, he found out that she was also going to be at U de M, having already confirmed her acceptance in the MSc in Immunology program there. While Lyne was going to begin her studies in September, Owen decided to defer starting his studies until January. Aunt Lily visiting him around grad made him think it was a good idea to go back to BC for a bit. She'd given Owen a letter: It was from his high-school's grad committee: Reunion in mid-September this year. He figured it was a great idea for him to return, if only for a while. He'd hesitated at first but eventually figured "oh what the hell" and sent off his confirmation. He'd be there.

An odd feeling of seclusion or something rather like it swept over him. Sure, he was in public, so that wasn't the problem. He thought about his high school graduating class and how he'd managed to keep in touch with only one person – he and the others had simply drifted away from each other. Owen got a bad feeling of this happening with the group he'd just graduated with, as it had with the ABC gang the year before. He knew they wouldn't be so far away from each other – email helped for as long as anyone had an email address – but it was still a nagging feeling he couldn't quite shake. He was always in touch with Marc and had been since Cegep. And Lyne. There was always Lyne. They were always in touch with each other, looking after each other, watching each other's backs.

Owen thought about how far he'd come in another aspect: He was the first person in his immediate family to get as far as the undergraduate level at university. His dad had taken a course at a local community college not long after the family arrived in Canada. His mother had finished her O-levels in the old country. Prior to them, it was some schooling and then work or family. University was for people "not like us."

But while at university, Owen found himself in good company. In his travels, he'd found that quite a number of his colleagues were also "first-timers" in their respective families; people like Lyne, Tony, Dannie, Alexa, Glenn, and Carina.

Carina. He'd almost put her completely out of his mind, what with convocation, news of Will, and moving into a new apartment having consumed his time. Owen had thus far resisted the urge to probe what could have happened, but it didn't prevent him from feeling despondent then heart-broken then disappointed. All he knew was that he was never going to see Carina again.

"Perhaps it's for the best. Perhaps I didn't need to be in a relationship with annyone."

He thought about things a while longer, trying to convince himself that Carina was just another 'mark' in his romantic life.

"Bullshit."

He'd been in love with her in a way that he hadn't been with others. He'd wanted to stay with her and wasn't shy about sacrificing much of himself just to be with her. He wasn't used to the idea of

someone just slipping out of a relationship, never to be heard from again. He felt there could even have been a 'say-au-revoir-but-not-goodbye' of some sort.

"Even a 'Dear John' letter."

But no. Nothing. Both Tony and Lyne tried to say something to him about Carina but never got the chance, and he never bothered to ask either of them.

He helped Lyne move to a new apartment at the beginning of the month. That she had to move was a surprise to her. Owen, too. Owen had passed by Lyne's old place the other day: all vacated. The street-level stores? No more smiling depanneur owner having to put up with rude, condescending, and/or racist clients from up the hill. No more dry cleaners to get those wrinkles out and those suits pressed. No more florist – he'd moved to the adjacent building anyway. All closed, boarded up, all-around spooky.

He asked around and found out that the building had been condemned, eventually to be torn down. This perplexed him. He'd seen the state of the building when he helped Lyne move. It looked pretty solid. Owen had been in a condemned building before and so knew what one looked like. According to him, Lyne's old place couldn't even be condemned for looking ugly.

Owen decided to poke and prod around further. He found out that the owners decided to "have it condemned."

"Translation: the new owners decided it wasn't built to their liking and worked some technicality to death, probably making an illicit donation to some politician, so that they could tear it down and put up something else in its place."

Owen didn't understand the need for it. The significance eluded him.

He'd received another letter from Tad, asking Owen if he intended to be at the grad reunion. He'd already made his decision. He wondered about all the faces whose names he couldn't forget back in the day. He was curious to see how much those faces had changed in 10 years. Owen had confirmed his presence for the event with someone he'd been in Algebra and History classes with – Shawna was her name.

"But not that Seanna", thought Owen, and not in glowing terms either.

Owen was curious as to why Tad hadn't emailed him. Owen had obtained a commercial email address at Dannie's suggestion and forwarded it to Tad, and Tad himself had a workplace email address, so Owen wondered what the problem was. After some consideration, Owen chalked this no-reply up to one of two things: either force of habit in communicating by post; or Tad's not recognizing Owen's new email address. Either way, the grad reunion was to be in a few weeks, and Owen decided to take a chance and send Tad a short email saying he'd be there, but that was all.

A motorcyclist roared by, not wearing a helmet, which Owen knew to be a ticketing offence. The motorcyclist looked happy. Owen thought once more about a friend from high-school, Robbie Simpson, and how Owen once said that riding a motorcycle would be the end of Robbie. Owen thought he had only been joking at the time but still had this sense of dread about this happening all the same. He decided to put aside this feeling and look forward all the more to seeing people he graduated from high-school with 10 years ago.

When Lily told him a few months ago that Owen had something waiting for him "back home", he figured it was only about his upcoming high-school grad reunion. But it also concerned the house she lived in, a house that was willed to Owen and wasn't rightly hers. She and John occupied this house while Owen was away, and the only thing keeping Uncle John from owning this house outright was a legal document, at least until they'd heard that something had happened to Owen. Legally-speaking, he had to either sign it over or be dead. He reckoned to get things sorted out once he returned to BC.

It was after she left when Owen also found out that Marc had been responsible for letting Lily know about the grad ceremony. About two weeks prior to convocation, Owen had been in the shower when Lily called his place and Marc answered the phone. Somehow, she convinced Marc to get her a ticket for the convocation. Marc came up to Owen after he left the bathroom and asked him if he could get another ticket but for Marc, claiming he 'lost' a ticket. Marc had given his ticket to Lily when she arrived in Montreal the day before convocation. She confessed to Owen that she was a little shocked seeing Marc, noticing his pink triangle button. She later asked Owen if he too was gay. Owen had felt like

stringing her along by saying yes but then realized that it would've amounted to false representation and in any event he didn't want to risk giving her a heart attack joking around like that.

He smiled at the idea of becoming a property owner but had rented places for so long and occasionally slept on people's couches that he wasn't sure what to do with this. He intended to think about it on the plane trip over.

"Knock-knock."

Owen looked up, rousting himself from Tad's letter. Back to Montreal and the present: "Who's there?"

"Just me", Chia said, "no joke."

Owen smiled as Chia sat down and ordered a drink.

"So? Are we gonna practice one more time before I get serious about my Law courses?" asked Chia.

"I'd like to", said Owen.

"Are you sure you won't be too distracted by something else?" she asked, pointing to what Owen was reading.

"No, I'm good. This won't be for a while yet."

"When do you leave?"

"Next week. I have some things to sort out and see back there before facing people I gradded with 10 years ago."

"Will I see you before Hallowe'en?"

"Yeah. I don't intend to stay long after the reunion. And my rail pass is only good for 30 days."

"Unless someone else gets your attention while on the road?" Chia smiled and winked mischievously.

"Hey, annything's possible. But 30 days is 30 days. No choice. I'll have to be back before Hallowe'en."

Chia smirked a bit. "I thought you were going by plane."

Owen couldn't help but smirk, too. "Yeah, but coming back by train. In any case, I guess we'll have to practice one more time, or did the Hallowe'en gig fall through?"

"Nah, we're still on. I suggest we get a full band together. And I mean Annie, Danny, and Dee-Dee."

"Danny's off out there somewhere finding himself."

"Hmm. Sounds familiar."

"I may've encouraged him. I think I know where I can find Annie. Dee-Dee should be okay, tho'. So maybe one practice won't be enough?"

"We'll see. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, right?"

Owen smiled.

Tad

"Bloody marvellous view!"

Tad's new place in Bayline cost him but he had the means to get it. Now it was his. The long daily commute was a reasonable trade for the view. He wasn't going to do much overtime any more: His bosses had allowed him to work more and more from home a while ago. He'd gotten a little more efficient and impressed his bosses just enough that they didn't give him much more work, figuring he was already busy enough – Tad learned that trick from reading Dilbert. He had also cut back on most leisure activities that cost him anything, saved that money, and then applied for law school. He figured he'd shut everyone up about him making a good lawyer one day and just set about doing it already.

For now, his new place pleased him. He still had lots to arrange: music-related stuff, like records, tapes, CDs, a double-turntable, stereo & speakers; and a Mac with a rudimentary music editing program. Tad had DJed at clubs and bars in the past, and it paid well. This often made for a good excuse to get out of working late on a legal file. Pots of coffee, rather than cups, were the norm the morning after. Life then was 10 kinds of crazy for him.

It was easier for him to DJ while studying to be a legal researcher. He breezed through classes, even while nominally awake. Occasional noises by careless Commune roommates, especially whenever Adam started crying, might've bothered him while studying, but if it did, then he never let it show.

He continued for a while to DJ at night while working at the law firm during the day. At some point, lack of sleep caught up with him, and he curtailed his DJ activities to weekends only. By the time he eyed moving to Bayline, he'd been down to scratching and spinning on Saturdays only, playing mostly private parties and putting that money into his equipment or savings.

He didn't have a lot of furniture. Settling in was going to be easy. The previous owners had even left him a fridge and stove, both in good condition. Tad didn't have to think about buying either of those for a while. He did have to think about a washer and dryer. There was one laundromat up the hill and another one, two short blocks down, both within reasonable walking distance. He had a choice of exercise regimen.

"But it was convenient having them inside, in case of rain. I'd better buy a larger umbrella."

Putting things into place, Tad thought about having people over at some point. He hadn't cooked often for friends since leaving the Commune, when he used to cook up large pots of chili or spaghetti sauce, whip up a great stir-fry, or even make jerk chicken, all enough for a gang of seven. Once he moved into an apartment in Kits, he cooked mainly for himself but also the odd person sleeping over. He had become accustomed to making enough for two people, with the second portion serving as next day's lunch. That was some time ago. He'd fallen out of habit. He started thinking about cooking for others again.

"Like riding a bike. Nothing to it."

He wasn't sure he had enough plates and utensils. Something else to buy.

He spent some time walking the beaches of Bayline, passing through the mid-section, which recently re-opened to the public. He wondered whether he should get a dog. He watched others walking their dogs, throwing balls or sticks. In one case, the dog's owner pretended to throw a stick and the dog chased after the invisible object, only to get nothing. The owner did this repeatedly, confusing the dog, eventually causing it to go chase after and lunge at a seagull, snaring it in its mouth. Tad regarded this situation with a strange fascination, wondering how many people would run and try to pry the fading bird from the dog's mouth before the poor thing was completely eviscerated. Tad figured the owner probably wouldn't pull that trick again anytime soon.

"Note to self: No dog."

From the end of the recently-restored pier, Tad looked to the southwest, faint outlines rising from the water – the Gulf Islands. Beyond those, Vancouver Island, where Aidan and fiancée lived. Tad wondered how they were doing. He knew he'd see them soon enough at their pre-wedding party early

this summer at Aidan's parents' place in Hatzquiam, with the actual wedding to follow on the family farm in Saskatchewan. And Tad would see Aidan on his own at the grad reunion in September, also in Hatzquiam.

"And it'll be the first time since 1990 that I've been to Hatzquiam. Maybe after that, I can invite people over for supper."

He wondered whether he should find someone and settle down. He promptly snickered at the thought. Relationships didn't seem his thing, so why marriage? He hadn't lived with anyone full-time since the days of the Commune. Like cooking for many: out of habit. Some people told him he was cruising along in life, snooze button taped down. Tad saw nothing wrong with it, living life at his own pace instead of marching to another's beat.

Back at his condo, out on his balcony, he watched the setting sun. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a neighbour on her balcony. They struck up a conversation – "Laura" was her name. She'd left behind a teaching position at a community college up north after having divorced her husband of 10 years. Their chat was pleasant, as was her cologne.

He knew that if he wanted to meet up with Seanna again, then he'd have to arrange it in advance. His work kept him relatively busy, but it wasn't far Seanna's part of Vancouver, where the Commune used to be, still the same large apartment where he'd once lived, now largely devoid of people. He found being there depressing. They usually met up at a café near her. Tad liked that place and wanted to find a place similar to it in Bayline.

"Except for that server. They can keep her."

Tad had taken a brief interest in her but couldn't get into her attitude. She was a little warmer around Tad later but he no longer cared. He did buy coffee, though. Not Seanna. She drank herb tea. Tad knew it was better for her health but never asked why Seanna had quit coffee altogether.

He hadn't heard from his former roommate Wendy in years, except whenever Aidan mentioned her in one of his letters.

He'd kept in touch with people like Owen and Aidan, but they were always far away, their communications arriving either by postcards or letters, which he kept, or the odd phone call, always long-distance.

After grabbing a beer, his thoughts returned to Aidan. Tad had never been to Saskatchewan, where the summer wedding was going to be. He was going to meet much of Aidan's distant family, about whom he'd only ever heard. He thought it was cool.

He wondered about Michelle, too. He'd wondered about Michelle since they first met as kids down at the beach in Bayline. They were only 12 at the time.

"Young love. Sweet love. My first girlfriend."

He smiled at that. They quickly found out that they were from different parts of Hatzquiam but were bound for the same junior high, where a friendship was born out of an ended relationship. She'd sent him a postcard recently from Prague before he'd moved, breaking a silence of more than two years:

"Hey Tad."

Sorry to be away so long. Long story. We'll have time to talk when I get back. Hope you're not sore at me. Hope this finds you healthy and happy. Call me at the usual.

Love Mish. xxxx"

He intended to get her full story soon enough.

Tad thought about what Aidan had said about Hatzquiam and how things had changed. He knew that things were bound to change there anyway, which is why he hadn't bothered to return to the place, even though he was never far from it. His parents had kicked him out during his last year of high school. He'd camped out at Robbie Simpson's place for a bit while finishing up his last year and then moved into the Commune. From then on, he couldn't be bothered so much with his parents, deciding not to worry about what they thought of him and just get on with his life. He got back in touch with his mother after he finished studying, and things started cooling down after that. However, it was too late: Tad had already started his life, and for four years his parents weren't a part of it.

Tad took a sip of his beer and looked out onto the bay.

"This is the life."

He wondered about Robbie Simpson, someone he hadn't heard from since about two years after high-school. He knew that Robbie's job had taken him from place to place. Seanna had mentioned something about seeing "Robert" in Vancouver.

"Then again, depending on the time of day, sometimes Seanna sees things that others don't."

He felt bad for having thought that. He knew Seanna wasn't quite the person she'd once been. If she said she'd seen Robbie, then Tad figured she'd most certainly seen Robbie. That was the Seanna that Tad knew from high school: She never forgot a thing.

Tad had once run with a culture-jammer collective. They did things the local cops didn't take kindly to, such as pick-axing an abandoned parking lot's pavement and planting flowers in it, or spraypaint-liberating a billboard from vapid ads, or even doing hit-and-run street theatre during a major-corporation sidewalk sale. They wore either fake mustaches or light masks when doing this. Plans A through Z all plotted out in advance in case things went sideways, they managed to avoid getting caught by the police. Tad thought it great fun doing this. Before moving away to Bayline, one group member told Tad they'd get together again. Tad somehow knew this wasn't going to happen. He knew he'd have too much to do, going back to school.

They'd all been former members of a group whose leader was someone named Wyatt Watkins. Nobody knew if that was his real name but nobody bothered to ask: The cause was more important than any personal details. Wyatt always claimed he represented and would lead the under-30 population to power. He talked about how everyone in this group had a voice and how each opinion had to be respected, claiming to have written a code of conduct for this, although nobody had ever seen said code. He often used this code to silence critics or cow them into submission, sometimes even demoting them in their responsibilities, and he did it in such a way that nobody ever thought they weren't guilty. Of course, this code of conduct never applied to Wyatt, and anyone bringing complaint against him based on past charges was firmly rebuked and shamed. Wyatt just had that way about him: Everyone wanted him to like them, so he always got his way, and nobody ever raised a hackle about it. Those who didn't like things usually left when nobody was paying attention, like the culture-jammers had.

Wyatt often used brainless obedient lackeys to get recalcitrant members in line or back into the fold, frequently resorting to harassment and mild intimidation. He did this while turning his collective into a political party to run candidates in the 1996 BC provincial election. He'd sent two of his lackeys after Tad to recruit him as a candidate. It would've been the second time Tad was asked, if only they'd had the chance. Sadly, for them, Tad had had a late-night party at his place some hours earlier as a send-off to his new life in Bayline. When Wyatt's lackeys came knocking, they were faced with hungover party-goers who weren't about to let Tad be intimidated. As a last resort, Wyatt sent Tad a legal-looking letter via registered post saying that Tad had broken the rules of conduct; that he'd be allowed back into the fold if he apologized; and that *"Our lawyer assures us that, if this goes to the Supreme Court of Canada, you won't win."* Tad treated it as a joke and framed Wyatt's letter, along with a cut-out of J.P. Patches, inside the glass. He knew that Wyatt's unwritten "Kindergarten Code" wasn't worth the paper it was printed on, and that harassing Tad was priority #1,001 on Wyatt's list of 1,000 things to do.

Tad heard what became of Wyatt and company soon after. Wyatt's attempt to organize a "team of independent candidates" for this election turned into a minor fiasco, with Wyatt breaking all sorts of rules – *"Most likely hadn't read any of the rules"*, thought Tad, quipping – and getting everyone disqualified in the process. And that should've been that.

However, Wyatt didn't appear to be finished by a long shot. He took the collective's money and hired another lawyer, one known for taking on hard-luck cases, saying he'd take this all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada and fight to get back on the ballot. His case was thrown out but only after a two-week delay, with the ruling stating that, unless there was a criminal act committed during that time, there was nothing to go on. By then, the candidate registration deadline had come and gone, and Wyatt had missed his chance. He then went off half-cocked, blaming Tad and others who'd left the collective for complaining to election authorities. Tad & co., however, had had nothing to do with it.

Since that time, things had been quiet, which would've given Tad some cause for concern had he still been in Vancouver. Only his former landlord and Seanna had his new address. They were under

strict instructions not to give out that information without contacting Tad first. He also had a feeling that Wyat would meet his end in due time, pushing his luck in all the wrong places with all the wrong people. For the moment, Tad could rest easy.

He looked out on the bay. He considered himself lucky to live where he was. He knew that he'd probably want to sell at some point but feared he'd have to put aside a lot more cash if he wanted something even similar in the future, providing he didn't need more space.

"Not likely. Still, the idea of buying and selling constantly just to maintain what you have can only lead to an overpriced housing market here."

Tad even entertained the idea of moving out into the wilderness, where the likelihood of over-inflated land and housing prices was slim to nil. In the city and the burbs, the rat race was now different from before.

"Owning a house has become an ideal to reach for. It only sounds realistic", thought Tad, becoming gloomy again, the parade of ideas having left town. "Worse than that, this ideal has become an orthodox dream that arose from the symbolic myth of an unlimited frontier, wide-open spaces, and the outright lie that 'no one was here when we arrived'. It's the slow death of humanity, as we try to determine how every nuclear family will have its monster house without either completely depleting the earth or, worse, organizing some pointless modern tribal war, all because you'll fight for what you have, and they'll fight for what you've got. Someone may even one day have money to buy up multiple properties and rent them back for exorbitant prices. But everyone will think things are just swelleriffic because they'll be living the modern lifestyle, never thinking of themselves as modern-day serfs who believe they have any power just because they have wallets."

He took a swig of his beer and swished it around in his mouth before swallowing it. He exhaled. He was normally a roll-with-the-punches, change-with-the-times kind-of guy but began to think times were changing entirely too quickly for him, and not in a good way. He once again reminisced about his time in high-school in the 1980s. He thought that things then seemed so uncomplicated. Sometimes, he wished he could go back there again.

Tad looked down at the street below, wondering whether he'd end up down there one day. He came close once.

A pigeon landed on the balcony railing. Tad stayed as still as possible, not wanting to scare off his new visitor. He made eye contact but briefly – the bird's eyes flitted back and forth. Tad wondered if pigeons were ever saddled with philosophical quandaries beyond whether to take a dump on someone or not.

"Probably not", he thought, as the bird decided to fly away, unloading as he went. "No deep thought there. Must be nice."

From along the main drag, Tad could hear a motorcycle – quite loud, too. It sounded like the motorcycle's muffler needed replacing. It reminded him of how Robbie loved his easy ride. The conversation he'd had with Seanna made him think it a good idea to get in touch with Robbie again. He figured on calling Robbie's parents' place, hoping they still lived at the same address in Hatzquiam. If anything, they'd certainly know his whereabouts.

But all of that was for tomorrow.

Michelle

The Baggage

She looked around for a familiar face. She had to remain alert. Not everything was where she thought it would be: The airport was larger somehow. She wasn't sure where her older sister could be. She also had to keep an eye out for her bags on the carousel – which they'd also enlarged – just in case someone decided to act atypically Vancouverite. She figured that it paid to be alert.

One woman, standing out in a crowd, dressed conservatively, hair wrapped up bun-tight, strict airs about her, eyes fixed on this younger woman, showed both worry and impatience – mother-superior-like out of another era – and a non-verbal stop-fooling-around.

"Hmm. A duffel bag, a day-pack, a large backpack, and a very large suitcase", said the stern one, eyebrows raised, as the younger woman approached her, bags now retrieved. "No small suitcases?"

"No. They get stolen too easily", said Michelle. "Will I show you my passport as well?" The stern one smiled. "Hey, made ya smile." She looked around a bit more. "Maureen, where's Da?"

"I'll explain in the van", said Maureen.

Michelle was starting to get concerned. She'd hoped to see her father upon arrival. She had no problem with Maureen meeting her, though it did beggar the question of why. Maureen had acted the mother figure for a long time, so it wasn't out of character, but Michelle felt that there was something different about Maureen this time.

Driving away from the airport, the flatness of Sea Island contrasted with the mountains and hills which Michelle had seen a lot of while abroad. The always-congested Moray Channel Bridge connected to Lulu Island, equally flat. Flat turned to boring while passing by the cranberry fields which flanked Highway 91. She thought the bumpiness of the old, two-laned Westminster Highway better for breaking the monotony.

Just when Michelle realized that Maureen had yet to say anything: "Da had a heart attack. When was the last time you spoke to him?"

"A week ago", Michelle answered. "How bad?"

"Bad enough. They've operated, but it'll be a while before he fully recovers. I hope you're ready to help out around the house. I'm going to need it."

"Sure. No probs. I'll be here for a while yet. That should be enough time for Da to get right again, no?"

Maureen pursed her lips.

"He'll be okay again, won't he?" asked Michelle, concerned.

"I don't know. We'll see."

"I'll do what I can", said Michelle, hesitating a bit.

"I know this will be difficult for you. I don't know what you've gone through, and I suspect I never will – Da didn't go into any great detail – but I do know that you were hoping to come home to recover before going off... to God-knows-where", said Maureen, tersely, disapprovingly. Mother Superior had spoken again.

"Yep. That was my intent. Now I'll be there when you need me and rest up whenever I can. What about the others? I'm guessing they're busy with their lives. Do you think they'll come around?"

"Genine is always around. She and Da were working on a restoration project before he fell ill. She's soldiering on in his absence."

"What kind of restoration?"

"You'll see it soon enough."

"*What the heck?*" thought Michelle, figuring Maureen could've addressed her in a slightly more adult fashion.

"Also, Genine quit smoking recently. Try not to get on her nerves, okay?"

"Sure", said Michelle, exhausted, eyes glazing over.

"Eileen comes by on occasion but doesn't have a lot of time between work and her three children."

Michelle looked puzzled. "I thought Eileen had only two kids."

"You forgot that silly man she calls a husband."

Michelle smiled. "That's mean."

"Made you smile", said Maureen, smiling.

"And what of Katy? Still M.I.A.?" asked Michelle.

"Yup", said Maureen, tight-lipped afterward.

At that point, going over the Alex Fraser Bridge, Michelle couldn't help but notice that things had started to smell pretty bad.

"You might want to roll up the window", said Maureen, as they passed by the Annacis Island sewage treatment plant.

"Did it already. No effect", said Michelle.

Michelle pulled out a postcard from Tad, the last sort of mail she'd received before leaving Europe. The postmark read Bayline, where Michelle was born, and where she and Tad had had their first relationship, at age 12.

"How could two 12-year-olds truly know love? So naive. So unsure. Not really love."

Since that time, he'd always been an unofficial member of her family. He always kept her up to date with news from "home" while she was away. She wrote back when she could, which wasn't always, but she could always count on him for pretty much anything, even just "as a friend".

Right now, Michelle needed the comfort of a friend or any close family member for that matter. She'd reached the point of burning out after years of teaching abroad and had had some serious setbacks in her life. She felt she'd had no choice but to boomerang home and recharge for a while.

Her coming back was fortuitous for another reason. She learned in her last phone call home that there was a letter waiting for her. She knew her high-school 10-year grad reunion was coming up soon, so maybe that was it. She once said years ago that she'd never attend a grad reunion. Now she felt differently. The idea of going started her wondering what had happened to people she used to hang out, play sports, or even attend classes with. Being abroad eventually excluded these types, save for Tad.

Maureen noticed the image on the postcard and smiled. "Sometimes I wish we'd stayed there."

"Mmm?"

"Bayline. Life seemed less complicated there. Or maybe that's just me talking."

Michelle smiled. "I had a good time there." She looked up.

"You never really kept in touch with anyone from Bayline, did you?" said Maureen.

Michelle looked up a bit, trying to remember. "Nope, but I was only eight when we moved from there. Hey, your grad reunion's pretty soon, too?"

Maureen pursed her lips. "Maybe I'll go to mine. You?"

"Yep. Lord knows why, but yeah."

Maureen smiled. "I imagine you'll want to freshen up a bit when we get home. Maybe a nap, too?"

"Nap? Yeah, that sounds good right about now. I'm bagged."

"Did you sleep at all during your flights?"

"Nope. I didn't even sleep during the stopovers."

"Okay, so maybe a nap's not enough", said Maureen, concerned. "You should go right to sleep."

"I'll be fine, Mo", said Michelle, feeling the baby once more, shutting her eyes briefly. She opened her left eye and looked to her left. "Maureen", said Michelle, correcting herself. "Sleep it is. We'll take shifts looking after Da when he comes home. Deal?"

"When they allow him back home."

Both of Michelle's eyes opened, concerned.

Maureen looked at Michelle, worried. She continued: "They say he'll be out and back home within a week. Maybe two."

"And do you believe them?"

"I want to."

Flat land rose to hill and ridge and then fell to flat land again. One more hill to surmount as Maureen drove towards the family home, halfway up a dead-end country road. When she was a kid Michelle and her next older sister used to say, "Are we *there yet?*", generally miffing their mother while

making their father smirk. Michelle also recalled how bored her teenage self got of Hatzquiam and couldn't wait to leave it. Now, everything again looked child-comfortable, only with more cars in front of the house.

"Oh, looks like Genine's still here", said Maureen, looking at one of those cars.

"And someone else, it seems", said Michelle.

"Eileen", said Maureen, getting out of the van, and addressing the woman who'd just come out of the house with two boys in tow.

"That's me", said Eileen. "Michelle?" Eileen hugged Michelle, who went stiff suddenly. Eileen didn't seem to notice. "It's been too long! I don't think you've met your nephews."

"Are you our auntie?" asked Brendan, the oldest one.

"Well I guess so", said Michelle. "No wait, I remember you. You were very young the last time I saw you both."

Carl, the youngest one, turned to Brendan and said softly, "She looks like Ma."

Their laughter was interrupted by a voice from off to the side, standing there.

"Hey Big Mo, is that our little Birdie?" said this woman, in coveralls, wiping oil and grease from her hands.

Michelle smiled.

Maureen looked at Genine, disgusted, but otherwise resigned – *"That's my family."*

A change of clothes gave way to supper, improvised, because nobody could anticipate the whole family being there. Whole, except Katy, still missing, as was Eileen's husband.

"I'm dumping him", said Eileen. "Yup. Getting a divorce."

Maureen seemed a little shocked by this. Divorce was something nobody in their family ever did, but these were modern times, and divorce was a very real part of modern life. Maureen never really liked Eileen's husband, but she did start to get concerned about Eileen, a hairdresser who worked from home, with June normally being a busy time for her.

During supper, Maureen's husband arrived with their twins, Lauranne and Liam. Michelle hadn't seen them since before they went into high school. Since her father's heart attack, Maureen had been spending less time at her own house and more time between the hospital and her dad's. It was also a while since she'd last seen her own family.

"Big Sis!", said Lauranne, the oldest granddaughter, to Michelle.

Maureen flinched. Michelle used to babysit Maureen's kids and Lauranne came to think of Michelle like an older sister. Lauranne was a few weeks away from graduating from high school, the same high school that Michelle had graduated from 10 years previously. Maureen had always had this feeling that Lauranne looked up to her less than she did to Michelle.

"So, how's life at Hatz High?" asked Michelle. "Does the back field still smell like sewage?"

"Ma, what's sewage?" asked Brendan.

"Something we don't talk about while eating", said Eileen, somewhat strictly.

Lauranne laughed. "When has it never?"

"Lauranne. Please", said Maureen.

"Relax, Ma. We're kinda joking around", said Lauranne. "I hate playing rugby on that field."

"So why play there?" asked Michelle. "Don't tell me. Let me guess: They bump the girls so the boys can take the main field, right?"

"Yup."

"They haven't changed their routine one bit", said Eileen.

"They're supposed to change it for next fall," said Lauranne. "Yeah. Great. And after I've graduated, too."

"Change what? The rules? Or the septic tank?" asked Michelle.

"The rules", said Maureen.

"They'll keep the septic tank around for swim practice, I'm sure", said Eileen.

"Oh, you're horrible. I can't believe we're related", said Maureen.

"Well", said Eileen, "you know what M'ma used to say: 'You can pick your friends. You can pick your enemies. But your family'..."

"...that's in the stars", said everyone else, laughing afterward.

The Memories

Sun streamed inside. Michelle's little room was mostly the way she'd left it before setting out to other places. It was almost a force of old habit that compelled her to get up and out of bed before her mother barged in and gave her a rude awakening.

Reverent silence.

"M'ma is no longer with us."

Michelle had been out planting trees in the BC interior, many clicks from the nearest sign of civilization, when she got the news two weeks too late that her mother had died. Even once she'd heard, she was unable to make it home for another two weeks. Upon arrival, she was met with either cold shoulders or looks of disapproval. She had simply been too far away.

Her sleep had been one so deep and long that it could've gone on for another day and it still wouldn't have been enough. She got the impression that she hadn't dreamt so much as floated in unconsciousness: hints of distant bad images, alternating between dimmed-grey unfinished basement and stone-cold alleyway, slowly fading as pale light from cracks between curtains blanched them towards morning reality.

Michelle didn't care to dwell on those images at present; she wanted to be as far away as possible from them and the events which spawned them.

Curtains pulled open some more, she peeked out the window. Gray rainy day, though in the near distance she could see blue skies piercing clouds.

"It's always sunny someplace near, but never near enough."

Michelle tried not to let the weather dictate her mood.

She looked inside – bedroom familiarities: Simon LeBon under glass still pointing and smiling at her; Moebius' art on a poster, fraying, bought at Hatzquiam's one and only comic book shop; two trophies prominent though in need of dusting; a jewel box made by Grandpa Malone – everything in its 1986-place. She appreciated being in the safety and comfort of home again.

Looking outside once more, she noticed the large garage out back which Maureen had mentioned yesterday, but it was only beginning to register now. She opened the window. Mallet TENK-TENK-TENKed on metal. Riveter VRRRed. A curse word. It was Genine. Michelle once called Genine "Rosie" but not around Maureen, who didn't approve of nicknames, no matter how appropriate. As with other things, Maureen didn't necessarily need to know. Genine just laughed.

More noise, though calmer, less percussive, came from the kitchen. She'd gone to bed earlier than the rest, so she wasn't sure who exactly it could be. She was surprised to see Lauranne there, making breakfast (small) for now and lunch for school. Eileen was getting her boys ready for school.

"Hey Big Sis", said Lauranne to Michelle.

"Hey Big Sis", said Michelle to Eileen.

"Hey big niece", said Eileen to Lauranne.

"I am not big", said Lauranne, Maureen-like, to her aunt Eileen.

"You know I didn't mean it that way", said Eileen.

Lauranne laughed. "I'm just teasing you, Auntie."

"Nobody should be allowed to have that much energy in the morning", said Michelle, yawning and stretching.

"Not before the first coffee, I agree", said Eileen.

"Even then..." said Michelle, finishing her yawn.

"No choice", said Lauranne. "Gotta go to school. Only a few weeks left. Woo-hoo!"

Michelle smiled at Eileen, left eyebrow raised somewhat, and gestured with her non-hitchhiker's thumb toward Lauranne.

"No offence, Mish", said Eileen, smiling, "but you look full of jet-lag. I bet you didn't even sleep on the plane."

"Yeah, like Mo told you, right?" said Michelle. "Well, I bet she told you that I didn't even sleep between connecting flights."

"Nope. I just figured that out all on my own", said Eileen.

"Smart", said Michelle. "We must be related."

"Where were you coming from?" asked Lauranne.

"Prague", said Michelle.

"How many flights?" asked Eileen.

"Three", answered Michelle. "That's two too many, in my opinion."

"I'll visit Europe soon, for sure", said Lauranne.

"I'd love to", said Eileen.

"Ma, where's Europe?" asked Brendan.

"Far away from here", answered Eileen, again somewhat strictly.

"Speaking of far away, where's Mo?" asked Michelle.

"Hospital", said Lauranne.

"Is she on shift today?" asked Eileen. "If so, that's early."

"No, she went to see Grandpa as soon as they allowed visitors", said Lauranne.

Maureen was a senior nurse at the local hospital up the hill. She'd done all the shifts. There were times when she tucked her kids into bed, then went off to work nightshift, came back home in time to get them out of bed, and then promptly hit the hay after having seen her husband off. Lauranne and Liam learned all about preparing breakfast for the family in case either their mother or father were too busy to do so.

"I guess someone in her position doesn't get any special privileges, does she?" said Michelle. She felt something brush against her legs. "Hey, *minou*." She scratched the cat behind its ears and under its chin. "Looks like someone else wants breakfast. What's its name?"

"Meenoo", said Lauranne.

"I meant the name of the cat", said Michelle.

"Meenoo", echoed Eileen, eyes rolling.

"Grandpa wasn't feeling very original the day he named him", said Lauranne.

"Da should've named him 'Plumber', I think", said Eileen. "He sure spends enough time with his face in the toilet."

Brendan scrunched his face up and looked at Eileen strangely.

"Actually", muttered Michelle, "that's not a pretty thought for this time of day. That alone might put me off of breakfast."

"I'll make you toast", said Lauranne, laughing a bit. "That's safe to eat when you're nauseous."

"I'll manage", said Michelle, yawning after that. "Auntie Mish is tougher than that."

Lauranne looked at Michelle with a big smile.

"Goddammit!" shouted someone from the garage.

"Someone's blowing a gasket", said Lauranne.

"Maybe she's blown a piston", said Eileen.

"Maybe she needs a cigarette?" quipped Michelle.

"Don't you start, Mish", said Eileen.

Michelle smiled, trying to stifle a laugh. Lauranne caught sight of her and smiled similarly.

"Dammit, dammit, sonnovabish!" cursed Genine, getting louder with every step.

"Hey Jee, keep it down", shouted Eileen. "Michelle's trying to sleepwalk."

"Heh heh heh", scoffed Michelle. "How droll thou art."

"Why is Auntie Genine swearing?" asked Brendan.

"Don't imitate her", said Eileen.

"Okay, dammit", said Brendan.

Genine, now standing at the patio door, broke out into laughter, as did Michelle and Lauranne.

"See what kind of influence you have on them?" asked Eileen, notably frustrated.

"Maybe if I influence them enough, they'll come and help me work on this project", said Genine, smiling, eyes wide, eyebrows moving up and down.

"I din swear", said Carl, a little alarmed.

"No, but you always imitate Brendan", said Eileen.

"No I doh'n, dammit", said Carl.

They all broke out in laughter, except Eileen.

"I honestly don't know where you two came from", said Eileen, exasperated.

"Your belly, Ma", said Brendan, matter-of-factly.

"I think they're adorable", said Lauranne, "even when swearing."

"Don't you start, too", said Eileen.

"Too late. I'm on the girls' rugby team. Swearing is a prerequisite", laughed Lauranne.

"Hey, Birdie", said Genine, tapping Michelle, who was dozing off, "wake up. Were you dreaming you were a butterfly?"

Michele flinched a bit. "Heh. More like a butterfly dreaming she needs another 10 hours of sleep", she said, yawning.

"No no no, no you don't", said Lauranne. "I'm making breakfast for you."

"You're wasting your time, Lo", said Eileen. "Remember? Toilet humour put Mish off her breakfast."

"I am sure I will manage", said Michelle, a little more assertively, just in case everybody didn't get it the first time. She then turned to look towards the patio door, hearing the sound of dogs outside.

Two corgis appeared at the patio door. "This one's mine. The other belongs to Da. Ain't that right, Chump?" said Genine, rubbing her dog's fur. "Yeah, good boy."

"Chump?" asked Michelle. "Do I want to know what Da named his?"

"Robespierre", said Lauranne. "I think he was being original that day."

"Hey Jee, does your dog respond well to your swear words, or does he tend to ignore them like most of us?" asked Michelle.

Eileen looked up and glared at Michelle.

"Wha'? Why – ?" said Genine. "Oh that. Nah, the crane just broke down. Pisses me off. And there's no mechanic I know of who's up and ready at this hour."

"What about you?" asked Eileen.

"Yeah, you'd think I could repair something like that, but no, it's something I never bothered to learn about", said Genine, "and right now, I'm not about to fart around with that. It's too important."

"What about that guy down the road?" asked Michelle. "Vince?"

"Same boat as me", said Genine. "Not qualified for that."

"So, I guess that means you'll have time to show me what you're working on?" asked Michelle, running her fingers through her long dark brown hair.

"When you're a little more awake, yeah", said Genine, smiling.

"As soon as I've taken the kids to school and done some of the groceries, I'm going to spend the morning with you, show you around", said Eileen quickly to Michelle. Michelle could feel Eileen being proprietary. Michelle wasn't comfortable with this.

"Okay, but if I fall asleep during any of this, you won't wonder why, right?" asked Michelle.

"I guarantee you won't fall asleep during this breakfast. Coffee?" asked Lauranne, handing Michelle a full cup.

"I thought you'd never ask", said Michelle, smiling.

One foot in front of the other, sluggishly, overalls on, went Michelle toward the back building where Genine had been working on her own since their father's heart attack. Michelle began to see where the train tracks were coming out of. The garage was large enough to accommodate a sizeable machine, like the old diesel locomotive they'd been working on.

"What do you think?" asked Genine.

"Wow", said Michelle, wide-eyed. "I never imagined you'd be working on a train engine."

"Yeah, Da said he was tired of working on cars and trucks and wanted to try something different."

"And since he no longer lives near Bayline, I guess a car ferry was out of the question."

"Ha! Funny."

"That is an odd-looking loco, too. I've never seen one like that up front before. Looks like someone stole a car design and applied it to a train. A BL-2, right?"

Genine looked surprised. "Yeah, it is a BL-2. How'd you know that?"

"I used to date a guy who couldn't shut up about trains. He loved them. I learned a lot from him."

"How long did that particular relationship last?" asked Genine, smiling. "Did he at least acknowledge that you exist?"

"Like I say, he loved trains."

Genine laughed a little. "So he did. I imagine you've probably seen lots of other trains in your travels, visiting other countries, haven't you?"

"Yup", said Michelle, yawning.

"I'm guessing things didn't go too well in the last one you lived in, or something like that, right?"

Michelle looked up, lips pursed, at Genine. "Something like that." She looked back at the engine, smiling. "So what colours will this be painted in?"

"...she said, changing the subject. Not sure yet. That's for someone else to determine."

"And how close are you to finishing it?"

"We were on track for July, but with Da's fallen ill, since he's probably gonna be out of commission for a while, if I soldier on by myself, then end of August, maybe September."

"Hm. Looking good. I should probably go back to the house and get prepared for Eileen."

"Sure, no problem, Mish. Say, if ever you want to talk..."

"Thanks. I'll think about it", Michelle said, smiling. "Hey?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you heard from Katy?"

"Nope. We orbit two different planets, she & I. Sometimes I wonder if she wasn't adopted. Why do you ask? Does she owe you money?" quipped Genine.

"No", laughed Michelle. "Just curious." Michelle couldn't put her finger on it but she felt that Genine wasn't 100% honest about Katy.

"The major combine seller was right there", said Michelle.

"And the old Co-op feedlot was over there", said Eileen, keeping her eyes on the road.

"It looks like they built this road through it. Is that another mall over there?"

"Yup, yet another one. That makes five now."

"Five? A bit excessive, no?"

"You should see how the older two malls are doing. Big box stores are taking away business."

Michelle was almost afraid to see what the downtown core looked like. She and her friends used to hang out there whenever the weather was good and those two older malls got boring. Eileen told her that there wasn't much happening in the downtown core, but she turned off North Circle Road at Canter Street and drove there anyway, where there were businesses a-plenty but almost nobody on the sidewalks and maybe a few cars moving along. Michelle remembered a time when she and her friends used to risk jaywalking on the main street, due to the traffic. Now anyone could jaywalk anywhere along that same street.

"The drag's a drag", said Michelle. "I used to get annoyed with how slow long lines of cars moved through here. But now...?"

"It's like this all over the place", said Eileen.

"Mainly in North America. Yeah." She looked here and there. "I can't find the used record shop I used to go to."

"They moved out years ago", said Eileen. "They lost business to the music stores in the malls. Same thing for that used bookstore you used to go to."

"But that's not even the same sort of business. Those stores in the malls sell only new stuff. Oh no. The ice cream parlour I used to go to is some fast-food place now. The coin and stamp store that the guys used to go to is still there."

"But he doesn't sell comic books anymore."

Michelle sighed. "I know at least a few people that I went to high-school with who probably wouldn't be pleased to know that."

"Aren't comic books a teenage thing?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised what adults still like these days. Comics and sports cards both are big business. Oh no! The restaurant I used to work at is gone! Bummer!"

Eileen exhaled, somewhat exasperated. "Look, Bayline hasn't really changed. When was the last time you were in there?"

"Before I left to teach English in Japan, after M'ma passed away."

"That's a while."

"I'd still like to see Bayline, if it's no problem for you."

Eileen smiled. "I see blue skies in that direction."

Bayline was one of those places where it was at its most beautiful on a sunny day. It had many rainy days too, as the west coast of Canada normally had, but such days were often more tolerable here than anywhere else. After all, Bayline was a seaside city, so what was a little more water? Not today.

"I think Bayline knew you were coming back and made the weather all nice for you", quipped Eileen, parking her car in the uptown area.

Michelle was too busy smiling to respond.

"Maureen and I were talking about this just yesterday", said Eileen.

"You, too?" asked Michelle.

"About Bayline?" asked Eileen.

"Yeah. She asked me if I'd kept in touch with anyone from here after we moved. What could I tell her? I was eight when we moved. I got a lot more schooling in Hatzquiam than here. Not a lot of time for me to make everlasting friendships then."

"Meanwhile, she graduated from high-school here, and I was stuck in the middle. I finished elementary school here and then started high-school in a completely different place. Grade 8 is hard enough on its own. But to move to another place? Genine had a better time adapting than I did."

"Yeah, but she's five years older than you and has never cared squat what anyone thinks about her anyway."

"This is true."

"So, what about Katy? In all this rigmarole over Da's condition, she's the only one I haven't heard from or about."

Eileen sighed, again exasperated. "Who has? No one hears from the glamour queen anymore."

"Does anyone know where she's living at least?"

"Not really."

Michelle walked with Eileen in awkward silence. She thought it weird that her family lost track of one another, or that no one cared at all. She knew Eileen and Katy didn't get along, but still had to wonder.

"There's our old elementary school", Eileen said, pointing.

"There?" asked Michelle. Eileen nodded. "Did they sell off a baseball diamond to make money or something?"

"No", said Eileen. "People just built up around it. Doesn't look the same, does it?"

"Not really. Then again, I was only here up until third grade. Everything looked bigger then."

"And brighter! It was the 70s!" joked Eileen. "The future only looked bright!"

"Such a great time to wear shades", said Michelle, laughing. "Let's go downtown!"

Eileen looked a bit exasperated. "I should've brought my hiking boots." She thought of the stairs sometimes replacing the streets which didn't switchback on the hillside.

At some point, Michelle pulled out the latest postcard she'd received from Tad at her father's place and read it to herself:

Hey Mish!

I know you haven't been here in years, so here's the update. Downtown has changed again. Grass growing on both sides of the tracks now. Train station now a museum. Weather still beautiful. Sand still smells funny. Waterfront Park closed due to politics. Your fave beach-side fish & chips stand still open. Yay! Hope things are going well for you. Take care.

Tad.

Michelle knew she'd have to call Tad at some point, but she still felt as if her head were in three places at once. And each time she saw Tad, it was like her head was in two eras at once, which was complicated enough. Besides, she wasn't really sure if she wanted either to be beaten at Scrabble by him or to beat him at Milles Bournes for the umpteenth time. Such things were a little predictable, a little boring, after a while.

"Do you ever hear from him?" asked Eileen.

"Oh, yeah, he lives...", Michelle trailed off, squinting her eyes, dead-reckoning, "...mmm, about that direction. I think."

"You think?"

"Well, somewhere back up the hill."

"Maybe you should've called around?"

Michelle shook her head. "He's probably at work right now. Besides, I don't have his exact address with me. There'll be later for that." She turned and looked out onto the bay. "Y'know, I never get tired of this view."

"Do you think you'll come live here? It's getting expensive, more and more", said Eileen, looking at Michelle curiously.

"Oh, living here would get boring for me, for sure. I'd just want to up and go somewhere else again. But the view? I could see this any time, just maybe not every day."

Concern wore poorly on Eileen's face.

"What's with the face?" asked Michelle.

"Do you ever think you settle down one day?"

Michelle looked down then back up again, lips bunched. "I suppose. When I'm good and ready."

"Granted, but do you think you'll ever do that here? I mean, not 'here' here, but..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean", said Michelle, laughing a little. Her face then became serious. "I don't know. Really. It's comfortable and familiar here, sure."

"But...?"

"But... I don't know. Maybe here. Maybe not here." She turned and smiled at Eileen. "Who knows?"

"I might come back here one day. To live, I mean." They sat on a large rock on the beach. Eileen sensed that Michelle was keeping something to herself. She figured discretion be damned and decided to ask. "So?"

"So?"

A sea breeze blew across them.

Eileen looked at Michelle calmly, sincerely. "Talk to me."

"What about that gas station?" asked Michelle, as Eileen drove into Hatzquiam.

"Oh good god, no", said Eileen, "not that one. Do you remember Perry?"

Michelle wasn't sure.

"From my time at high-school? Not long after we moved to Hatzquiam?"

"That guy who used to harass you and your then-boyfriend?" asked Michelle.

"The same. The old man who runs that gas station back there went off for three months and left Perry in charge of things. Service's gone to shit and then some."

"How so?"

"He treats his customers badly. Sometimes he brings his kids to the place and they run wild, in and out of everything, and that's when he's not yanking one of them by the hair and beating them within an inch of their lives."

"Not with customers around?" Michele asked, a little shocked.

"Even with customers around. And if one of them looks like he or she is gonna complain, he threatens them. He's as abusive to them as his old man was to him. Be thankful you didn't meet someone like him in your grad class."

"I'm not sure how I would've handled someone like that. Maybe like you and your guy did to Perry?"

"Yeah. That would've worked!" said Eileen, laughing. "Just kick him solidly in the family jewels like I did. Then watch him get pissed off and pick a fight with my Ex."

"Didn't that end badly for Perry?"

"Clocked right square in the nose."

"I'm sure Perry enjoyed the abuse."

"Ooh, that's cruel, even for me. This one. We'll stop in here."

"Say, why not wait til Truman's Corners?"

"Under renovation til next month."

"Did Vince decide to sell?"

"Not quite. You should go talk to him later. I'm sure he'll be around."

Someone was sitting on the front stairs when Eileen and Michelle returned home. She was all dressed in black, her long dark hair down her back almost to her waist, her make-up minimal but just so. She had a large suitcase with her.

"Hey Katy", said Michelle.

Katy hugged Michelle lightly but felt something was wrong.

Eileen, unimpressed, just stood and stared at Katy. Letting go of Michelle, Katy looked at Eileen coldly and indifferently.

"I heard about Da", said Katy, tired and not in the mood to convince anyone who didn't already believe her.

Michelle wondered who Katy could've heard from regarding her father. Everyone she talked to said they hadn't heard from Katy. And it wasn't as if their father was in any position to contact her.

"Mysteries abound."

Katy looked at Michelle. "I see you don't look the worst for wear, Mish."

"Still getting over jet-lag", said Michelle, "but tomorrow's another day, right?"

Katy stared at Michelle blankly before smiling but still felt there was something else to Michelle's story. "Yeah."

Eileen was unchanged.

"Not a hello?" Katy asked Eileen.

"Hello", said Eileen, sounding Maureen-like. "I suppose you'll want to stay in your old room, right? Well, I don't imagine it's changed much since you were last here, has it? It's not like anyone goes in there, do they?"

Again the blank stare from Katy. "Yes for the room", she said, gently taking a hold of her large suitcase and lifting it off the ground.

"Eileen?" said Michelle to Eileen.

"Hmm?"

"I'm still feeling bushed from yesterday. If you don't mind, I'll go take a nap."

"Suit yourself", said Eileen.

Lauranne came back to her grandpa's place from school with a friend. They saw someone sitting in the living room, reading a book, looking like she didn't want to be bothered by anyone. Her friend, Lee, whispered something in Lauranne's ear. Lauranne smiled and said, "You're on." Lauranne sat down, looked at Katy, and comfortably said, "Hi."

Katy breathed out a bit and put the book down. "Hi", she said, smiling.

Lauranne and Lee looked at each other, and then looked back at Katy. They smiled at her.

"That's your Auntie Katy", came a voice from the other side of the patio door. It was Genine.

They looked at each other, smiled, and nodded, all in sync.

"Knew it. You owe me a loonie", said Lee to Lauranne.

Katy smiled but said nothing.

"Mom", said Lee, smiling at Genine, "Dad wants to know when you're gonna be back home – like with your family? That's why I'm here. Well, that, and to hang out and jam with Lo for a bit, too."

"I'll call him soon, okay, Lee?" said Genine, afterward turning to Katy. "And you? How are you? I can't remember the last time I saw you."

"Does anyone really ever?" asked Katy.

"I do", said Lee, getting her guitar out of its case. "You were here just after my 10th birthday."

Katy smiled.

The Bottle

By the time Michelle woke up from her "nap" of a good four hours, there were already many others in the house. She heard arguing coming out of the kitchen. Verbal fights were not uncommon here, but Michelle figured that they'd all outgrown that.

"Nope."

As far as she could figure by the loud voices, Maureen and Katy were going at it, with Eileen egging Maureen on and Genine trying to calm people down, probably getting glared at by either Maureen or Katy or both.

She could also hear music coming from the living room, though it was in danger of being drowned out by what was going on in the kitchen. She saw Lauranne and Lee trying to play music while Brendan and Carl, along with Lauranne's brother Liam, played a board game. Lauranne and Liam's father, Mike, was looking at a coffee-table book about Canadian Olympic athletes.

"We should write a song about family reunions, eh Lo?" quipped Lee, eyes then widening. "Complete with fight scenes!"

"Might need an orchestra for that", said Lauranne, shaking her head, almost laughing. "Could be expensive. Let's bypass that. Oop, now they've changed targets."

"And partners", said Michelle, almost shocking everyone by how quietly she had come into the living room.

"Yep", said Mike. "Now it's all about your Auntie Genine swearing around you 'kids'."

"All of them think she's a bad influence on us", said Liam.

"I live with her year-round. She's always been a good influence on me, so that's bullshit", quipped Lee, trying to keep a straight face.

Lauranne wasn't so lucky and burst out laughing. All the others smiled.

All of sudden there was silence in the kitchen.

"Oh dammit", said Carl. Everyone laughed.

"Brendan!" shouted Eileen, "Watch your mouth!"

"It wasn't me, Ma", shouted Brendan.

"It was Carl, Eileen", said Michelle, as she drifted into the kitchen. There was silence while everyone looked at her. "So, is there room for one more in this little brouhaha? Not that I have anything to argue about. I love all of you, after all. But I'm still beat enough from travelling. Any complaints about me would probably just bounce off and hit someone else, thus exacerbating the situation. So don't mind me. I'm just here for something simple. A drink of water, maybe? Yeah, that would be a good start."

As Michelle was getting a glass from the cupboard, Maureen stood there mouth agape, Genine and Eileen burst out laughing, and Katy pursed her lips in attempting to stifle a smile. Michelle then poured herself a glass of water, turning her head away from them a little to conceal a smile.

"What? What'd I say?" asked Michelle, afterward drinking her water and looking doe-eyed and innocent at everybody.

Maureen looked at Michelle and then softened her appearance somewhat. "Maybe you'd like something to eat, Michelle? I can't imagine you've had much to eat today."

"Yeah, thanks. I'd appreciate that. I think my body and mind both are in other time zones."

"Well, I can heat some leftovers from the fridge, if you don't mind", said Maureen.

Michelle looked at Maureen and smiled warmly. "Thanks. I'll take care of it."

"Well, I'm gonna go lock up the garage for the night", said Genine. "The mechanic won't be in until tomorrow afternoon, so there's no sense in me staying around here for the night. And I have to get the kidling home to bed..."

"I heard that!" shouted Lee.

"...and remind hubby that I still exist." She left with a flashlight and went outside toward the garage.

"I should probably go home for the night, too. So I'll leave things in your hands", said Maureen, turning to Michelle.

"Our hands", said Eileen. "If it's all the same to you, I'll go back home when I'm good and ready."

"Sure", said Maureen, smiling. "Whenever you want."

Michelle stirred herself into active mode and got her fridge-food into the microwave.

Maureen looked at Michelle, still smiling, before turning to go into the living room. "Alright!" announced Maureen in almost military fashion. "Time to head home. Grab your stuff, say your farewells, and get in the car."

"We should jam more often", said Lauranne to Lee.

"You've got high-school to finish and I don't want you any more distracted than you already are", said Maureen to Lauranne.

"Ah, lighten up, Ma", said Lauranne. "I'll finish my studies, no problem."

Maureen stared a lecture at Lauranne.

Lauranne rolled her eyes and said – pointed and exasperated – "Fine."

Genine came into the living room. "Okay, Lee-mello, I'm good to go. Let's motor."

Lee and Lauranne hugged goodbye.

Pretty soon, aside from Brendan and Carl, the living room was empty. Everyone was heading toward the front door. Those two stirred from their game long enough to rush out of the living room to say their goodbyes.

"And it's time for you two to go to bed", said Eileen to her boys.

"Ah, that's bo'shid", muttered Carl.

Eileen glared in Lee's direction. She was just going out the door, her back turned to Eileen.

"Oops!" muttered Lee, grimacing a bit, and feeling Eileen's glare.

Genine turned her head to conceal a smile and in an attempt to stifle a laugh.

Back in the kitchen, Michelle had just finished reheating her supper. Katy was by the patio door, staring out into the night.

Michelle looked up from her plate at Katy. "Talk to me."

Katy turned to Michelle. "Do you ever feel sometimes like someone from outer space dropped you off here with an adoptive family after you were born?"

"And wonder when my 'real' parents will come and pick me up? All the time."

"Me, too."

"I've always said you had stars in your eyes."

Katy smiled, and this time a real smile. She went to the counter where Michelle was eating and asked, "So, how long are you here for this time?"

Michelle took a bite and slowly shook her head, saying, "Not sure." She chewed some more. "October at the latest, I guess. Long enough to rest up, help Mo take care of Da, go to my grad reunion, and then we'll see."

"I didn't go to my grad reunion", said Katy, taking out a bottle of wine and two wine glasses. "I didn't see the point. I had no friends in high-school anyway."

"Not sure about that", said Michelle, taking another bite. "You had a few. You had me."

"Well, you're my sister. That's a bit different. Plus you graduated the year after me. Wine?"

Michelle sighed through the nose, mouth still being full of food. She swallowed her food, looked at Katy, and said, "Oh, why not?"

After pouring wine, Katy raised her glass and said, "To my best friend in high-school: You."

Michelle smiled, clinked glasses, had a sip, and then said, "You wanna be my guest at my grad reunion?" Katy looked at her wide-eyed. "I'm serious."

"Hmm. I dunno. I might run into that guy I dated for a bit."

"The guy who always wore a leather jacket, no matter the season?"

"Um. Yeah. Him."

"And spoke so loudly that M'ma thought her head would explode just listening to him?"

"Um, yeah?" said Katy, smiling.

"Would that really be a bad thing?"

"Not really. I love awkward social moments, as you know", said Katy, eyes rolling and eyelids fluttering.

"Okay, five-by-five on that."

Katy sneered. "Uhn. Military terms."

"Comes from having had one parent in the military. What can I say? In any case, door opened, door closed."

"Thanks anyway."

"So, how's the acting career going?"

"You haven't told anyone, have you?"

"Relax. The only people who know are the ones you told."

"You're the only one."

"Okay, the only person then. I stand grammatically corrected."

Katy laughed a little. "It could be better."

Michelle looked up from her now-almost-empty plate. "Aiming too high, too fast? Or maybe you'd be better at movies than TV shows? Perhaps something else in the business interests you more than acting?"

"Don't judge."

Michelle knitted her brows. "I never judge."

Katy smiled again. "I'll tell you all about it later, okay?"

Michelle smiled, supper eaten. "I'll hold you to that."

Eileen came back downstairs from bathing her boys, reading them bedtime stories, and tucking them in for the night. She heard laughter from the kitchen. She stopped just before the entrance, smiling, pleased to overhear but not be involved in Michelle and Katy's tipsy conversation.

"Who was the guy always going on about getting a motorcycle?" asked Katy.

"Not the one who chain-smoked?" asked Michelle.

"God, no. Not Smokey Boy. The athletic guy. Everyone liked him. What was his name?"

Michelle had to think about it for a few seconds. "Rob, Robbie... Simpos... Sysiph... something", Michelle said, slowly crossing her eyes and contorting her face.

Katy burst into laughter at Michelle's facial expressions.

"Simpson! Yeah, that was him."

"Dunno why I laughed. I'm terr-bub..., terr-o-bob..., tabobble, oh fuck I think I'm drunk."

Michelle sang, feeling groovy, "Slow down, you drank too much."

"So I get tipsy after a few glasses. Big deal. Don't you?"

"After a few? Not really."

"I think you inherited both parents' tolerance for alcohol."

"Yeah, well, drinking Czech pilsner kinda toughens you up, too. I hear eating also helps. I'm happy to've eaten something, but by the way, have you already eaten?"

"Yes."

"Oh yeah? How much and when?"

"Enough. Not long ago."

"That long ago, eh?"

Katy noticed Eileen and put up her emotional guard but still smiled. She eye-signalled to Michelle. Michelle turned and said comically, "Oh, hello. Nice of you to join us. Should I get you a glass, too?"

"I'll help myself to some sherry, if you don't mind an old grump like me joining in", said Eileen, smiling a little. As she poured herself a glass, Eileen said, "I guess it's just us looking after the homestead tonight."

"It'll be quiet here", said Katy, looking down at the counter. "Maybe that's a good thing."

"Compared to last night, yes", said Eileen. "It'll be quiet."

Katy's eyebrows knitted in curiosity.

"Why's that?" asked Michelle.

"You didn't hear Jee in the garage last night?" asked Eileen.

"Nope. Dead to the world. Jet lag, remember? Did she have the windows open while working?"

"Pretty much. I think she was trying to hammer something into shape."

"What time was that at?"

"Oh, about 10pm."

"And when did she get up?"

"5AM, judging by the noise."

"And I thought I was tough."

"Not sure, but I think she's become obsessed with carrying on the work on that thing."

"Well, she did mention a deadline."

"There you go."

"What is she working on?" asked Katy.

"Restoring an old diesel engine for a railway museum. It's a special commission. Jee told me that Da couldn't resist accepting it", said Michelle.

"If she's happy...", said Katy.

Eileen sipped her sherry but could feel her patience slipping away. "Happy was how she and Da started out. But since he went into the hospital, Jee's been more driven than happy. Also, quitting smoking has made her irritable."

"It'll pass", said Katy, matter-of-factly. "She'll get it all out of her system and feel better later."

Sensing another argument in the making, Michelle spoke up again: "Happy. She's definitely happy. I mean, she was definitely happy to explain things to me."

The phone rang. Eileen picked up. "Hello? Sure. A guitar pick? Where? Living room? Sofa. Gotcha. I'll go look. Hang on." Eileen put down the phone and went into the living room. Katy and Michelle looked at each other, curious. Half a minute later she was back in the kitchen. "Nothing there."

Katy spoke up: "Has she tried shaking her guitar?"

Eileen gave Katy a what-would-you-know look. Michelle then glared at Eileen. "What's that? It was in her guitar?" Eileen turned, looking surprised at Katy, and then spoke again. "Okay, good to hear! 'Night, Jee." As she hung up the phone, Eileen turned back to Katy. "Spooky how you seem to know things like that."

"Not at all", said Katy. "I just figured if it wasn't in the living room, then it had to be in one of two other places. Nothing spooky about it. I dated a guitarist for a while. He used to misplace picks all the time."

"And should I guess where the other place would've been?" asked Eileen, somewhat sarcastically.

"Back pocket", said Katy. "What can I say?"

Michelle smiled and looked toward the fridge. "Anyway, got any more alcohol here?"

Eileen went to look inside the fridge and noticed a tall green bottle with a ceramic stop and no label on the side. "I wonder what this is?" She opened it, took a sniff, and was revolted by the odour.

"I'm sure it tastes better than it smells. Here, lemme have a whiff of that", said Michelle, taking the bottle and then whooping, "Woooooohoo! Here!"

Katy took the bottle Michelle handed to her. She scrunched her face. "Whew! Don't anyone light a match around that!"

Michelle took the bottle back and smelt it again: "Smells like home-made *rachiu*. That'll clean your innards out, pronto!"

"I wonder what it's doing in the fridge and where it came from", said Eileen.

"I dunno", said Michelle, taking the bottle and pouring herself a small amount, "but I sure know where it's going. Want some?"

"Sure", said Eileen, draining the last of her sherry from the glass. "You only live once."

"Why not?" said Katy. "I'm already drunk enough as it is. What's one more drink?"

"Cheers!" they all said.

Brendan and Carl came downstairs the next morning to where Eileen was, sound asleep on a living-room sofa.

"Ma! Ma!" said Brendan, shaking Eileen. "Wake up!" He may as well have been shouting as far as Eileen was concerned.

"Honey, not so loudly, okay? Ma has a headache. A little more quietly, please", said Eileen.

"Sorry, Ma", whispered Brendan.

Eileen scanned the living room. "*Now where are those two?*" she asked herself of Michelle and Katy. She then got up quickly. An all-star drum corps rat-tat-tat-tatted inside her head.

"Never again", she muttered, head in hand

She walked slowly towards and into the kitchen for a glass of water. She turned her head slowly and saw Michelle and Katy, each of them with a glass of whiskey on the rocks in hand. "What the...?"

"Good morning to you, too", said Michelle.

Eileen looked at them both incredulously. "What is it with you two? Drinking again? So early? Aren't you hungover?"

"Yes", said Katy, not looking too healthy.

"Hair of the dog", said Michelle. "So disgusting it actually works."

Eileen flinched. "Oh, gimme a belt o'that."

"Can we have some too, Ma?" asked Brendan.

"No, you cannot", said Eileen. "You're far too young for that."

"But I like dogs", said Carl, forlornly.

"Eesh", said Michelle, "I've created a monster."

"Speaking of dogs", said Eileen, taking a sip of whiskey, "- oh geez, that's horrendous - shouldn't one of us feed Robespierre?"

"Who?" asked Katy, bewildered.

"Da's corgi", said Michelle.

"I'll feed him", said Brendan.

"Me too!" said Carl.

"Okay", said Eileen, turning to Michelle, eyes hurting, "what's he get in the morning?"

"What do you mean?" asked Michelle.

"Dry food or wet food?" asked Eileen, hoping for an answer which didn't require any thought or troubleshooting.

Michelle just shrugged her shoulders. "I never thought to ask."

"Great", said Eileen, resigned.

"Da always used to say, 'When in doubt, feed him dry food and change his water'. Sounds like good advice", said Katy.

"And when did Da say that?" asked Eileen.

"Years ago, when *Grippette* was still alive", said Katy.

"Alrighty." Eileen searched the cupboards until she found the dog's kibble, wondering how the heck Katy could remember things like that. She filled the cup that was inside the bag and gave it to Brendan. She then told Carl to get the dog's water dish so she could fill it up. Brendan did take the kibble outside and put it in the dog's food dish, and Robespierre was very excited to get food - too excited, in fact. He jumped up and down on his forelegs in excitement, causing Carl to get so excited that he wanted to play with Robespierre, forgetting to get the dog's water dish, and instead started running around the yard with the dog. Naturally, Brendan couldn't let his little brother have all the fun, so he joined in, too. And all this in their sock feet.

"Oh, no!" said Eileen, 21 repeating rifles now added to the drum corps in her head.

"Cue 'Yackety Sax' from the *Benny Hill Show*", said Michelle discretely to Katy, although not discretely enough.

Eileen turned and glared at Michelle. "Yeah, you just wait until you have kids. One day. You'll see."

Katy went outside, got the dog's water dish, filled it up, and then put it back outside. Meanwhile, Eileen gave chase and brought them to heel. The dog, too.

"Thanks", said Eileen, who managed a little smile, walking back into the house.

Katy smiled back a little.

"Sorry, Eileen", said Michelle.

"Forget about it. You're just being you", said Eileen, smiling somewhat.

The phone rang. Michelle answered. "Hello? Hey Jee. What? Okay, so the mechanic won't be by til later in the afternoon? How late? That late? Okay, gotcha. And what? An unmarked wine bottle in the fridge? Don't open it?" Michelle grimaced; her eyes went wide. "Right. See you later today." She couldn't hang up the phone fast enough. She felt the blood drain from her face. "Sweet mother o'fuck."

"What's the matter?" asked Katy.

Michelle was looking, eyes wide open, at the unmarked bottle left on the counter from last night's mini-bender, its contents down to almost half. "I think we drank something we weren't supposed to drink."

"Oh shit", said Katy.

"I knew I should've stuck with the sherry", said Eileen. "Now look what you two've done."

"Us?" said Michelle and Katy in unison.

"I seem to recall we were a trio", said Michelle.

"Who was it who said, '*Sure, you only live once*'?" asked Katy.

Eileen was not pleased. "I hate it when you remember what I've said."

"Mimetic memory", said Katy. "Can't help it. It's a blessing and a curse."

"Keep it up and I'll have a few curse words for you", said Eileen, who then noticed Michelle re-opening the mystery bottle. "Hey hey hey, what're you doing?"

"Well, we all seemed to get along just great when we were drunk", said Michelle. "I figured, who am I to question what works? Who wants a glass?"

Katy came over, looking directly into Michelle's eyes, took the bottle, and re-stopped it. "I think we have a bigger problem on our hands."

"Christ, yeah", said Eileen. "We don't even know what that is."

"And yet we drank it anyway", said Michelle. "Could've been poisonous."

"I think it was", said Eileen, head in hand.

"Are you dead?" asked Katy.

"No", said Eileen.

"Then it wasn't poisonous", said Katy. "Trust me, sis: You'll probably live long enough to see your own great-grandchildren."

Eileen eked out a little smile.

"So, what are we gonna do?" asked Michelle. "The bottle's gotta be filled up, but if we use water or any other alcohol then Jee will know it's off by smell alone."

Katy picked up the phone. "What's Genine's number?"

"You...are...not..." said Eileen.

"Her number?" said Katy, Maureen-like.

Michelle heard the over-the-phone sound of ringing and started to fret. She sensed that Katy was going to take the blame deliberately, taking the heat off Michelle and Eileen. Katy had been blamed for a number of things not of her doing when she was younger. Michelle knew how unjust this had been for Katy and didn't want her to become a martyr over a few glasses of alcohol. But Michelle also knew that Katy had a way with words. She relaxed a bit.

"Hi, is Genine there?" Katy started. "She just left? Is this Lee? Hi, it's your Auntie Katy. Doing okay. And you? I heard you lost your guitar pick. Oh, good to hear! Listen, I was wondering about something. Your mom called here earlier telling us not to touch an unmarked wine bottle in the fridge, but now we're all curious. Do you have any idea what's in that bottle?" Katy listened intently but then appeared confused. "I'm not sure I can pronounce that. How do you spell it?" She took a pen and wrote it down on a note pad. "Oh that's worse. In English phonetics? Sure." She continued writing. "Alright, thanks. Curiosity satisfied. Oh, do me another favour? Don't tell your mom I called. I'll talk to her later. You take care. Bye."

"Well?" asked Eileen.

Katy looked slightly exasperated. "What. The hell. Is *pawt-cheen*?"

The Mountain

Katy had always felt like she didn't belong.

Her Grandma Malone once remarked that Katy had an old soul. Right after, a very young Eileen foolishly blurted out that Katy was an accident, saying she'd overheard her parents saying it. But on some level, Katy seemed to know this already. That one of her sisters had said it, and that her parents said nothing in response, didn't prompt Katy to ask questions. All this confirmed what she'd always felt. From then on, Katy and Eileen were never very close.

With Michelle in the family picture, Katy felt as if Michelle was simply a delayed twin sister, complimentary in all aspects. They often supported each other in difficult situations, which happened whenever Eileen said or did something stupid and then thought it a great idea to pin it on Katy, doing so with airs so confident and strict that pretty much everyone thought she was trying to imitate Maureen, though at times it came across as an unintended parody of the oldest sister. Ironically, it was Maureen who was the first to believe Eileen in these circumstances. During this time, Katy drifted further away from her older sisters but grew closer to Michelle. This was less the case post-high-school, but they still stayed mostly in contact and confided in each other whenever they needed.

Time since then saw things mellow out between Katy and Maureen & Eileen. This didn't stop the arguments, and Eileen also seemed to harbour resentment towards Katy, one which only appeared to ease up but neither soften nor disappear over time, except whenever alcohol was involved.

In the case of Maureen, Katy felt she didn't need a second mother to tell her what to do. Whatever Maureen had to say to Katy, like the argument last night about Katy living the "glamorous life" while Maureen "carried a lot of the load in this family", Michelle felt was going to be said to her, too. Younger Michelle often caught hell for standing up for Katy whenever she was wronged. In such cases, Michelle often got away with much, though Katy remained the recipient of Maureen's scorn. As a result, Maureen only really knew her two youngest sisters through a limited filter.

In Katy's head, Maureen seemed to have willingly borne the cross of responsibility – even when others were available to help – but then later had the nerve to complain about it. Sometimes, Eileen tried to act the sergeant around her two youngest sisters, but neither Katy nor Michelle could take her seriously.

In the present, Eileen took the lead in saying she'd take care of the "bottle problem." She figured on not having a tough time finding an acceptable substitute spirit to top it off: The taste was still very much in her mouth.

"Not gonna forget that any time soon", Eileen told the others.

Michelle took this as a sign to get out of the house for some hours, if only to get fresh air, and Katy agreed. Michelle wondered whether Eileen was going to moan about them just taking off in the middle of something but then decided to take Eileen's word on her getting things under control and tried not to worry about it.

A while later, they were at the base of Grouse Mountain, with Michelle game to try the Grouse Grind, only to have Katy nix that idea. Michelle figured that the mountain air would help clear out the last vestiges of her hangover, now a mere annoyance for her. Katy suggested the Skyride and a hike up top, though not for too much. Katy was slender but hadn't engaged in any serious physical activity in a while, and she didn't want to take the chance of pulling a muscle or spraining an ankle. Michelle thought this was a bit of a cop-out, until she recalled that she too hadn't done any serious physical activity in a while. Michelle borrowed her dad's camera but Katy jokingly warned her not to play paparazzi around her. Michelle looked at Katy, confused.

At one point, they stopped their alpine walk-around, and then Katy turned to Michelle and said, "Okay, your turn."

"My turn what?"

"Talk to me."

Michelle smiled and then looked down. Katy never told a soul anything. But Michelle's happy demeanour disappeared at the prospect of telling even Katy what had happened not so long ago. Doing anything on the schedule of another never really appealed to Michelle. At the same time, she knew she'd have to tell Katy. Michelle looked around casually. They were alone.

"How'd it go?" Michelle asked Eileen.

"Not too bad", said Eileen. "I found the strongest gin I could."

"Gin?" scoffed Michelle. "You might as well have dumped Da's after-shave into that."

"Hey", said Katy, "I like Gin."

"Vive les différences", said Eileen. "Anyway, it smells just as repulsive, if not more so."

Katy bunched up her face "whatever"-like.

"I would've used saki", said Michelle.

"When it's your money, you buy it", said Eileen, not quite recovered.

Money was something Michelle hadn't had time to think about recently. She had some cash on her and in an account, and she hadn't yet maxed-out her credit card, but all that wouldn't last forever. She knew she could stay here rent-free for the next three to four months and help take care of everything, but she also knew that having money would give her some independence during this time. Without it, she'd have the generosity of her siblings, which wasn't unlimited. Plus, she wanted to leave again at some point, and that would take funds. The last vestiges of her hangover were lifting but Michelle still felt tired enough that she figured she couldn't do any proper planning.

"This will take a few more days of recovery. Knowing my luck, something good will pop up when I least expect it. Then again, that's probably something I shouldn't rely on."

This Flight

***"It's hot and I'm not sleepin' but I'm fine in your arms,
So near your sweet lips, hopin' the sun don't rise.
My hair's all over the place, no bother at all.
I could stay here all day. Now wouldn't that be nice."***

*Sure, it's a nice thought. I hope for it again,
I could be dreaming too much though I'm not sure that's wrong
I know that one day you'll call me again,
But the waiting is killer, yes it's way too long.*

*Days become weeks, and weeks become months,
This is probably the dumbest thing I've ever done..."*

"...And probably the dumbest thing I've ever written", said Lee, striking her guitar strings. "I suck at rhyming."

"Who said you had to rhyme in a song?" asked Genine, taking a break from all things mechanical.

"Well, nobody? But it just sounds kinda weird."

"Maybe keep trying?" offered Michelle.

"Dunno", said Lee. "Maybe I should stick to playing other people's songs."

"Packing it in so early on songwriting?" asked Lauranne. "You're too young for that."

"Oh yeah?" said Lee. "And how many candles were on your last birthday cake?"

"Seventeen, but who's counting anyway", laughed Lauranne.

"Soon to be 18", said Michelle, smiling, eyebrows arched up. "So when do we take you to Alberta to get you legally drunk?"

"Hey, yeah!" exclaimed Genine. "Great idea! I haven't done a road-trip in years!"

"I'm not sure mother would approve of that", said Lauranne, flinching a bit.

"I'll come, too!" said Lee.

Genine looked sternly at Lee. "Lisa Marie Martin, you are not old enough to drink, so no, you're going to stay here."

"Quelle fuckin' drag", said Lee, as she started strumming the tune to the song she'd played earlier.

"Well, if you're nice to me and graduate from school, we'll do this for you in three years. Deal?"

Lee nodded. "Deal."

"Speaking of being too young", said Michelle, "that song you were singing? A little mature for you, no?"

"Ah, someone's memories of last Christmas down in Puerto Vallarta", said Genine, singingly, smiling. "Her 'first time', too."

"Okay, I take that back about you being too young", said Michelle.

Lee looked smilingly at Genine and sang:

"A little louder about my sex life, Mom.

The whole clan didn't hear you."

Michelle laughed a little. "So Jee, I guess that repaired crane could do with some company?" She moved her eyebrows up and down.

"Sure thing", said Genine. "Still up to being my little helper?"

"You betcha!" said Michelle. "Where are my overalls?"

Michelle's garage responsibilities didn't amount to much: Just sitting around and waiting for Genine to ask for some help, or for the odd tool or part, and this so she didn't get in the way or touch the wrong thing. Sometimes there was no conversation: Genine had work to do. Michelle didn't seem to mind the relative tranquillity, despite the tool-related noises, as well as a verbal request here and

there. As much as Michelle liked being around her family, it came as a relief for her to hear neither chatter nor banter.

At some point, Genine took another break from work. "So how does it feel to be my little helper?"

"Not the first time I've helped someone out", said Michelle. "Just with a loco. That's different."

"Speaking of different, I noticed that Katy was up and out of the house pretty early this morning. What's that all about?"

"Did you see her?"

"Yeah."

"But you didn't stop to ask her?"

Genine went silent.

"Okay", said Michelle. "Extra work."

"What's that?"

"That's when they're filming a movie or a TV show episode, and they need people in the background. Y'know, passers-by, people in a crowd, and the like. I did that once. The pay is reasonable, but it's a lot of waiting around to be called. During that time, your best friends are a pillow to sit on and a book, preferably a long one."

"I thought she wanted to get into acting, like, 10 years ago."

"Well, it is acting, after a fashion. If you want to know more, you could ask her yourself. Just saying."

"Mm-hm. Sounds like what she's doing on the set is kinda like what you're doing with me right now."

"Fair point. For me, I may as well earn my keep somehow while I'm here. With everyone else coming and going, it's not like I have another house to take care of. In fact, I could probably jet out of here now, and this house would still be in good hands."

"Yeah, but then we'd miss you terribly. Again. But then that's you, isn't it? Always on the move, it seems. Our not-so-little Birdie."

Michelle grinned. "Yeah. I never got why you called me that. Not that it annoys me..."

"Do you remember when you rode your bicycle all the way to the US border by yourself?"

"Alone? Just me? Yeah, I was like nine or something? I don't really have a clear memory of that."

"Well, I remember. You were nine. M'ma and I went out looking for you – she was frantic. Da and Mo were in the other car. By the time M'ma and I caught up with you, you were peddling along Zero Avenue near Mount Kitson and about to cross illegally into the US. Then we all came back home. Da wasn't pleased. I remember he gave you such a licking over that. Until you started high-school, you weren't allowed to go anywhere walking or on your bike without someone to accompany you. I remember telling M'ma that you were a "Little Birdie", always trying to fly out of its cage. The name stuck. M'ma didn't like that. Mo, neither – she doesn't like nicknames, period."

"Still doesn't. In the end, I flew the coop anyway." Michelle turned to Genine. "And I don't hate your nick-name for me. Well, at first, yeah, I did. Later on, I was okay with it. It was endearing."

Genine smiled.

Michelle decided it was time to change the subject. "Can we pause for a few minutes?"

"Sure. Why?"

She breathed out a bit. "You asked me a question before. I think I have an answer for you."

Genine smiled warmly. "I'm all ears."

The Visit

Eileen had to think of an alternative.

She couldn't return to her old house, except to pick up the odd thing whenever her husband wasn't about. But even that was an exercise in precarity, as her husband was not likely to keep his usual schedule, especially with things the way they were now. She figured he was most likely quite despondent by now. She didn't want to take the chance of him doing something he'd later on regret. She also didn't want to listen to him blather on again about how there was nothing wrong and how nothing had happened. She wasn't in the mood.

She worried about the possibility of him picking their boys up at elementary school and then taking them away from her, especially if she let all of this go on for too long. She wanted to sort things out with him sooner rather than later.

Eileen had the additional concern of having to call all her customers and apologize for having to postpone or cancel their hair appointments. She wasn't able to receive them at her father's place. Her studio was at her house, and she didn't want to take the chance of customers seeing her and her husband fighting. Bad for business.

Katy ambled into the room and noticed Eileen looking through the classifieds while writing down things on paper but was a little too pre-occupied with getting something resembling breakfast in her to be concerned with what Eileen was up to. Katy had never really been one for small-talk, and she wasn't about to take it up. Still, she couldn't help but be curious at how absorbed Eileen was with what she was doing. Katy sat down with a bowl of cereal, glancing up at Eileen on occasion to see what her older sister was doing but otherwise continuing to eat.

Eileen stopped taking notes and then noticed that Katy was sitting at the other end of the table, quietly eating, looking down the whole time. Eileen put her pen down softly and continued looking at Katy for a few seconds. Eileen smiled a little before returning to her newspaper.

Katy looked up at Eileen for more than a split second. Eileen looked at Katy at the same time. They said nothing.

Meenoo decided this was a good moment to remind his human staff that he was missing something in his life. Eileen and Katy's eyes were on each other when Meenoo jumped up onto the table, giving them both a start. He went to Eileen and put his left front paw on the paper she was holding in her hand, lowering it to the table: He'd chosen which human was going to have the privilege of feeding him.

"Frickin' fleabag", muttered Eileen.

Katy tried to conceal a smile.

"Ah, but you're so cute", said Eileen, rubbing him under his chin.

"Looks like feed time", said Katy.

"Ah shit", muttered Eileen. "Now where's his food?"

Katy said nothing but pointed to a cupboard where the cat food was most likely to be, most likely because their father tended to keep things in the same place all the time. Eileen went to look and saw that was indeed where it was. At this point, Eileen wasn't even going to think about why Katy remembered things like this.

After having dealt with his majesty, Eileen sat down once more to deal with her pre-interruption pre-occupation.

"So?" asked Katy. "What are you working on? Looks intense."

Eileen looked briefly at Katy and then sighed. "I don't know, really. Just an idea I have. Not a very good one either."

"Did you think it was a good idea when you started writing down things?"

"Yes."

"Then it's probably still a good idea, whatever it is. You just need to see it through to the end."

"You don't even know what this idea is."

Katy raised her eyebrows and po-faced a little. "Yes. You're right. I have no clue what you are working on." She smiled. "So? Are you gonna tell me what you're working on?"

Eileen thought about it for a few seconds and then smiled. "Sure."

The old gas station at Truman's Corners looked shiny, new, and boxy, too.

They were putting the finishing touches on things when Michelle decided to wander by and see if Vince the mechanic was in.

"Not today", said one of the builders. "Come back later."

"'Later' could be an hour from now or a few days from now", thought Michelle.

Off to the immediate left of the garage was a dead-end road down which the parents of one of her exes lived. She wondered if Aidan had returned at any point, perhaps, like her, even to boomerang home for a bit. She also wondered if she was projecting.

"Probably nowhere near Hatzquiam."

If she had been curious enough about passing by Aidan's parents' place, then it must have been brief enough that she decided, like waiting for Vince to show up, that it wasn't worth the time. Being curious was fine, but she didn't feel like venturing down a dead-end road.

Another road she wasn't sure about was the one which would have lead to her old high-school, had she decided to go that way. That part of her past beckoned her, but she knew it to be another dead end: Her schoolmates had long graduated – she'd see them in a few months – and she wasn't sure which of her former teachers would recognize her, and this during their working hours. Besides, she'd intended to take care of something in the here-and-now, and that lay in the opposite direction.

The receptionist at the general hospital didn't know who Michelle was. She told Michelle that the head nurse had to be notified of any visitors to see her father. Michelle asked if the head nurse was on shift today, mentioning Maureen by name. The receptionist said no but then had a glimmer of recognition. Michelle showed the receptionist her ID, to which the receptionist said she'd "forget" to notify Maureen but that Michelle still had to sign in. Michelle figured it was better to deal with Maureen later than have Maureen come in all of a sudden while Michelle was visiting. Michelle wanted to sneak in a visit to her father, all by herself, without anyone knowing, without anyone else present. She wanted to be alone with him.

All the same, Michelle hoped the receptionist wouldn't catch hell for that.

Robert was in a private room: no pesky neighbours to bother him. She walked in cat-like, coming in on his left, and noticed a body on the bed but could not see the face. As she walked farther in, each step as soft as the last, on the bed's clipboard she could make out the familiar print of last name first/first name last. It was him, fast asleep.

She looked at his still face – him, a little older than when she last saw him, but him all the same. A part of her wished he could wake up, even if he wasn't up to talking or listening, so she could at least see a glimmer of his strong brown eyes, and maybe even a smile, if only a little one. She'd entertained the idea of talking to him but then remembered that he wasn't in a coma but would probably wake up startled at the first sound he heard or the first touch he felt. Michelle decided this would be a hands-off, no-talk visit. She also intended it to be a quick visit.

Katy went off to Vancouver by herself to put her name in at various talent agencies and studios. She figured to follow leads given to her by people she'd known down in LA, hoping those were still good, and the people in question weren't full of it.

She'd received a phone call early in the morning, telling her she wasn't needed for extra work that day. She felt relieved. It galled her to sit there all day and wait to be called, even if she was paid to wait around. She'd already acted in theatre and wanted to do more in film. While down in LA, she'd started to have doubts about her film aspirations when her agent advised her to change her last name to "Beecham" or "Boshan" when he figured that nobody would be able to say her real last name without screwing up the pronunciation. She figured that the pronunciation of her last name wouldn't be an issue in Canada but then forgot that many companies filming in Vancouver were from south of the border and that it'd be the same issue, different place. She'd toyed with the idea of publicly adopting her mother's maiden name but then wondered at what point she could stop changing things about herself all to satisfy wilfully-ignorant types. Acting may have given her opportunities to become other people, but outside that, she still had to be herself.

She also recognized that actors sometimes had to take a step back to do things that didn't necessarily bring greater fame and fortune, like extra work. She hadn't been entirely unknown in LA but she was quite unknown in Vancouver.

Eileen was quite pleased with herself. Her conversation with Katy helped her to get her thoughts out in the open and get some feedback, clearing up some hesitations she'd had in her head.

Phone calls placed to two other hairdressers, both in the Bayline area, and they all agreed: No more working from home, and no more working for someone else. They were going to open a shop together within the next two months and be their own bosses.

Eileen decided to start looking for housing near Bayline. She wasn't about to drive over hill-and-dale to work every day either.

Katy took her portable CD player with her on the Skytrain and bus ride out of Vancouver. She was listening to the soundtrack from one of the "Qatsi" films and found the Glass music appropriate, watching the traffic go in the opposite direction, noting how the music sometimes slowed down as the bus or train did for the next stop.

The leads she had been given were still iffy but appeared to have shown more promise than what she'd had before, which wasn't much. She was told about a party she could crash in a few days, where she might have the chance to talk to others outside the business aspect of the film industry. Though she'd been to many parties before, they weren't really her thing. At times like those, she was never sure if she was really being herself or acting in a role.

She thought of her conversation with Michelle from the other day. It bothered her. Michelle's attitude had been like always, and this despite what had happened back in Europe. Katy found it a bit too resigned for Michelle. At another age, Michelle might have been jokey about whatever was bothering her and tended to laugh things off. If she had been angry about anything, she would've shown it. But this time, it was neither-nor. Katy felt that this wasn't quite healthy. She was concerned.

Katy also thought about her conversation with Eileen and how intense Eileen had been in telling Katy things. She recalled being of some help in the feedback department, making Eileen happy. Normally, Katy didn't care if whatever feedback she gave made someone happy. She just did whatever she thought was right and then moved on.

This time, however, a little smile: The thought of what had happened pleased her. She closed her eyes.

Maureen looked at the visitors' register. Her eyes went wide.

The Game

The transit ride into Vancouver had been a drag.

Michelle had decided to abstain from morning coffee at the family abode in favour of getting free refills at a no-longer-new-yet-still-hip café in Tad's former neighbourhood of Kitsilano, still popular with students and the recently graduated, despite being increasingly expensive. She knew she wasn't about to start a game of Scrabble or Milles-Bournes with Tad until she'd had at least half a cup in her.

Before the coffee even arrived, there were the hellos and the how-are-yous not spoken face-to-face since what felt like forever. Michelle and Tad had kept in touch since then, often by postcard, once by telephone. Whenever one of them moved, letters were more in order. Return addresses were useful.

It had taken nearly a week for Michelle to meet up with Tad. In her mind, the timing couldn't have been better: She preferred to be far from the house for the day. Maureen wasn't too pleased that Michelle had snuck in to visit their father on her own. Michelle stated firmly that she was an adult and could make her own decisions in life, and in any case, she hadn't disturbed him, so what was the problem. Maureen backed off but decided that this matter hadn't been settled by far. Michelle wondered would it ever.

Coffee induced a fine social weave, following hugs and flowing in and out of conversations. In their correspondences, they'd known each other's news, but there were some things better expressed in person than on paper.

Michelle intended to best Tad once more at Milles-Bournes. She'd always had. Tad had always taken this as an opportunity to improve his game, and so was never discouraged whenever 'next time' rolled around. In fact, he looked forward to it, going so far as to practice with someone else in the interim.

"Ah, and who is this new card-playing partner?" asked Michelle.

"All in good time", Tad said, coyly.

Michelle played a flat-tire card. She smiled. "It's good to see you again. Have I already said that?"

Tad smiled back. "Not in the past two minutes, no. It's always good to see you, dear."

"So, any news from our little old gang in high school?"

"Oh, just things here and there. Nothing important."

"What do you mean 'nothing important'? We know each other too well to say 'nothing important'. C'mon, spill it."

"Nothing important. That's all it means."

Michelle looked at Tad curiously. 'Okay, be that way.'

Another five minutes of playing passed before Tad hit Michelle with an out-of-gas card.

"By the way", said Tad, "your ex is getting married soon."

"Sounds nice", said Michelle. "Which one?"

"Aidan McGregor."

Michelle looked up from her cards then placed them face-down on the table. She looked down at her cards and then back up at Tad. She attempted a scoff – no luck. "Married?"

Tad nodded, eyebrows slowly knitting together. "Yeah. Married. Y'know, like, walking down the aisle, wearing a tux or wedding dress according to one's needs, exchanging vows..."

Michelle let out a little laugh. "Okay, okay. I have been to a few weddings, remember?"

"I know. I was with you when you got ill at Genine's wedding."

"Oh, yeah, my first drink."

"And the ripe old age of 12. Quite illegal at the time."

"Yep", said Michelle, not wanting to ruminate on that particular subject. "That was a big wedding, one of the few times I saw my family from Quebec and Ireland there. And one of the last times I saw so many family members in one place."

"I suppose Eileen's wedding was also a big to-do?"

"Sure was! I was even a maid of honour at that one!"

"And you still weren't old enough to drink."

"Yeah, but who was watching?" Michelle laughed a little as she said that. Her smile slowly disappeared. "Yep. That was the last big happy family reunion. And, now she's getting divorced."

"Divorced? That didn't last very long."

"Long enough to have two boys. I think things started to change for her around the time of the fire."

"Fire?"

"Yeah. Her husband was away on business. She barely pulled her kids out of there in time. Pretty hairy."

"That was the fire in Mount Kitson I'd heard about! Damn! That was lucky for her. She could've lost both her children."

"Now the oldest one is picking up swear words from other members of my family, including Genine's daughter, Lee."

"Like mother, like daughter?"

"Yeah. They're both comics." She looked at Tad a certain way. "So, who else from high-school?"

"Well, there's Wendy. In the OK, married and living in a very nice lakeside place. Only one kid."

"The one she was pregnant with in high school?"

"The same."

"Who's her husband?"

"A guy named Drew. They met two years after grad and got married two years after that. Aidan said the wedding was beautiful."

"So, Aidan. Who's the new mystery woman?"

"Do you remember Gail?"

"Oh no", said Michelle, shoulders slumping. "Not her."

"No, not her", Tad reassured her. "Her youngest sister, Natalia."

Michelle bunched her lips up a bit and then slowly shook her head. "Not ringing any bells. Which year was she in?"

"1989. Three years after us."

"Hm-hm. And Seanna?"

"Seanna? Up until I moved, I saw her quite a lot. Still the queen of her roost. We'll meet up for tea soon. She didn't look so well that last time I saw her. She was your sub-in for Milles Bournes."

"Aha! I knew it! She and I used to play each other almost to a standstill back in school. But why's she not looking too well?"

"Whatever she has has been getting worse with time. I dunno. And that's about it. I don't see too many of the old gang these days. Well, our old gang. You don't remember Owen, do you?"

"No", she said, shaking her head. "Doesn't ring any bells. Hang on, there was one more. Katy and I talked about him the other day. Robbie Simpson?"

"Ooh! I haven't heard that name in a while", said Tad, somewhat insincerely. "The last I'd heard, he was in suburban Toronto."

Michelle looked at him for a few seconds before looking at her cards once more. Something about what Tad had said didn't sound right.

"So?" asked Tad, concerned look on his face.

Michelle tried to smile it off. No luck. She whispered to him. His eyes went wide.

The Tree

Saturday morning. Early. Dew on the grass: strange for a mid-June morning. Lauranne tended to get up early, even on weekends. She saw Michelle sitting at the kitchen counter.

"So, what has you up earlier than me on a Saturday?" asked Lauranne.

Michelle's dreams, with each passing night, had gone from her floating or slo-mo among the nebulous and smoky to the vivid, the more defined, the distinct. She didn't run in her dreams. She couldn't. She wanted to. Being pinned down didn't allow for running. Half-a-world away, some weeks back, this hadn't been a dream at all – not even night terrors – but terror in the night. Worse, hints of events long ago began to mix with all this to the point where she couldn't distinguish one event from another.

She wondered if she should mention anything to Lauranne. Telling one of her sisters was one thing. Troubling her oldest niece with all this was quite another.

She smiled. "What can I say? I went to bed earlier than normal. I've been up for a while now. I couldn't sleep anymore. I feel like being active today."

"Active?"

"Yeah, physically active. Hiking around the top of Grouse Mountain the other day gave me a taste for something more."

"How about cycling?"

"I haven't been on a bike in god knows how long."

"Once you learn..."

"...you never forget. I know, I know." Michelle thought about it as she took a sip of coffee. "Sure. Let's do it."

"Well, you're in luck. I rode my mountain bike here yesterday after school. And you can borrow Grandpa's bike."

"Eh, Da's bike is off-limits to anyone but him."

"Sure, but I don't think he's in any condition to ride it."

"True. I hope his bike's in good condition to be ridden."

"So, where do we go?"

Michelle smiled but shook her head slowly. "Everywhere. I wanna go everywhere."

"Sounds like we'll have to pack at least a lunch."

"And I'd like to stop at the florist's along the way."

"Why's that?"

"Flowers for M'ma."

Lauranne went sombre for a few seconds. She bunched her lips but then smiled. "Maybe Five Corners, too?"

"Sure. I haven't been there in a while."

"They made it over a few years back. There's a café inside the general store now. I go there on occasion after school, when I'm not here, or at home, or at rugby practice."

"Oh yeah?" Michelle smiled wryly and arched her eyebrows. "What's his name?"

"Auntie! My god. Have you no shame?"

Michelle smiled a little more. "Of course not. Get real. My shame and I haven't been on speaking terms for years."

Lauranne laughed. "Was it that obvious? Fine. Yeah, a guy I like works there. We... have... been seeing each other... for a little while. And he's asked me to go to the grad ball with him. Of course, I said yes."

"Of course", said Michelle, smile diminishing. She took a long swig of coffee. She felt a little like history was repeating. "Well, we can't disappoint either of you, can we?"

"Here lies Evelynne Beauchamp (née Malone)

Wife, daughter, sister, mother, beloved."

Michelle looked at her mother's grave, laid flowers before the tombstone, and then prayed a little. She hadn't been given to praying for anything since she was a child. Her parents were never the most religious, and neither was she.

"What was Gran like?" asked Lauranne.

Michelle stirred from praying and looked at Lauranne a little strangely.

"I mean, as an adult. Like, Gran died when I was 10. Mum hardly talks about her."

Michelle got up, brushed herself off, and starting walking slowly with Lauranne towards where their bikes were locked. "I can't speak for your mum. I don't really know why she acts that way. It's strange, too. Your grandma could be strict at times, but she had her funny moments, too. Not funny in the way your Auntie Genine is. If someone tried to put her down, she'd always have a snappy comeback and put that person in his place."

"His?"

"The poor fool was usually a guy."

Lauranne laughed.

"But your mum – I dunno – I can't recall her not being strict so often. Like she mostly forgets to laugh."

"She's like that, too often, I think. I don't recall a time when she wasn't strict around me or my brother. Gran sounded less strict by comparison."

"Your mum seems to like being everyone's mother. Not a bad thing necessarily, always having someone like that looking out for you." Michelle looked away. "I must confess: Sometimes it can be a bit much."

Lauranne wasn't sure what to say. They started unlocking their bikes. "So? About Gran?"

"From what Da told me, M'ma was solidly Catholic back in the old country. Not so much in Montreal, and almost never in Vancouver. They weren't anti-clerical or anything. That's Da's side of the family."

"I think I learned about that in history class. Anti-clerical in Quebec? Wasn't that dangerous at one time?"

"Yup. But that was Da's family. The 1930s, -40s, and -50s were scary times in the world. Principles, beliefs, patriotism. They don't always agree with each other under the best of circumstances. From what Da and M'ma told us, it was even worse then."

"Makes you glad you weren't around then, eh?"

"Yes, mam. Should we get gone?"

Where they'd gone was the old General Store in Inneston, commonly referred to as "Five Corners". This place was the original inland European settlement in the Hatzquiam area along the old post road that went up the Fraser Canyon. When the interurban railway opened in the 1890s, being routed through a slightly higher, less flood-prone rise in the land to the northwest and taking on mail transport in the Fraser Valley, Inneston was relegated to bypass status as downtown Hatzquiam rose in prominence. Inneston was still an important centre for local life.

"Yeah, the post office didn't even close til fairly recently", said Lauranne.

"So, why the questions about your Gran? Apart from simple curiosity", asked Michelle as they sat down with their drinks.

"I don't know if you knew this, but I'll be going to Ireland in August for three weeks."

Michelle thought, *"and that's where it starts."* She had travelled a lot but had never been to the "Old Country", as her mother used to call it. It was still on her list of places to go to. She felt a little out of sorts that her niece was going to visit there before Michelle had the chance to – like it was outside the normal order of things.

"Will your plans include visiting the Cliffs of Moher?"

Lauranne thought about it for a few seconds. "Yup! We'll be going there."

"Ah. Then you'll be in County Clare. Nice place from what I've heard."

Lauranne looked at Michelle, puzzled. "Did Gran tell you this?"

"When she was alive, yeah. While I was working at Expo 86, she told me lots of things about that place. Before that, nobody really talked about the Old Country, not even those who came out for your mom's wedding. But I guess M'ma thought it looked like I was going to go out into the world at some point; that I should be prepared in case I ended up there. But even though I've travelled a lot, that's one place I've never visited."

"Why not?"

"Dunno. It was in my plans, for sure. Maybe I thought it wasn't so urgent. The same for where Da came from. Or maybe I just looked west across the Pacific and decided that was the direction I wanted to go in."

"Maybe you'll go to that part of Europe next? Or the one after?"

"I dunno."

"You're not thinking about staying here for good, are you?"

Michelle smiled. "It's... tempting." She nodded. "It's certainly quieter here."

Lauranne smiled back. "Sometimes, I think it's too quiet here."

The pang of déjà vu came over Michelle again. She felt like it was her rather than her niece who was 17 going on 18.

"So, this guy you're keen on?" asked Michelle.

"Lower your voice, please", hissed Lauranne in a low voice.

"Huh?"

"That's him working at the counter."

Michelle leaned over slowly to get a glimpse of the subject of Lauranne's attraction. He seemed to have his head in his job and didn't notice Michelle or anyone looking at him. "Oh. Well. How does he feel about Hatzquiam?"

Lauranne shrugged. "It never really occurred to me to ask. Besides, we've only been seeing each other for a few weeks. A little early for that sort of question, don't you think?"

"It's never too early to set the record straight", Michelle was going to say but then reconsidered.

Michelle tried to veer away from where she thought Lauranne's present life was going, namely repeating Michelle's from 10 years past. She thought about her and Aidan meeting during a social dance session. She became attracted to him and made the first move a few weeks before graduation, later going to grad ball together. She reflected on how serious things started getting after grad; how Michelle caught the travelling bug while working at Expo, but how Aidan thought it a great idea to make a life with her in Hatzquiam after his future studies. She recalled feeling restless then and realized that his idea of a future life didn't exactly excite, entice, or content her as much as it did him. It all ended abruptly.

Michelle remembered Aidan not taking the break-up well, saying it was kismet that their paths had crossed again. He'd even pulled out their class photo, Grade One, from Bayline Elementary, showing him and Michelle in the middle row, on opposite sides, each equidistant from the photo's middle, rather like how far each lived from Truman's Corners. She'd always appreciated symmetry in life, though it was hardly justification to keep a relationship going. Still, she wondered why she didn't recall Aidan from that earlier time but how he could her, especially given how little they'd both been.

"Memory's a funny thing", thought Michelle, philosophically. She had to remind herself that all this was her past and not Lauranne's future. Her niece's path was her own to decide.

"Yeah", said Michelle. "I guess it is."

Lauranne looked at Michelle and smiled.

It had been five years since she'd last seen Lauranne. For Michelle, it was initially like picking up where they'd left off, and yet so much had changed in Lauranne's life since pre-teenage of then: She was about to graduate from high-school. Regret softly shoulder-tapped Michelle, hinting at her having missed almost a third of Lauranne's life.

"Was I supposed to've stayed around here, gotten married, had kids, and all this for no good reason other than watching my niece or any of my sisters' kids grow from babies to children to teens?"

What little regret she'd had was soon sent packing when she thought about the life she'd lived until this point. She felt she'd never trade all she'd seen and experienced for what she once called "the quiet life."

"Seanna would've called it a life 'a life sentence', though Tad would've stuck the letters 'DK' in front of that."

Yet she also knew how the life she'd lead had put her out of sync with the rest of her family. She thought about yesterday when she'd momentarily lapsed and seen Lee once more as a little kid, and about her arrival when she wasn't sure when she'd first met Eileen's boys.

"They grow up so fast."

"Hey, Lee", said Genine. "Whatcha working on?"

"Homework?" said Lee, somewhat sarcastically, not looking up.

"I can see that. What kind of homework?"

"Social Studies. It's thick."

"That big an assignment so close to the end of the school year?"

"Nah, not big. I meant stupid."

Genine looked at Lee curiously. "Where did you learn that meaning of 'thick'?"

"Gran used to say it all the time."

"Well, yeah, that's the way she spoke English. Nobody speaks English like that around here."

"That's as may be, but I like speaking like that."

Katy came in through the front door.

"Hey, Katy. Guess what? Lee's speaking like M'ma."

"Not completely", said Lee, a little bewildered, eyebrows knitting.

"Really?" Katy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't see a problem here." She looked over at Lee and then to Lee's homework. "Family tree? Let me guess: Social Studies, right?"

"Got it in one, Auntie", said Lee. "It's thick."

"How many generations back?" asked Katy.

"Two or three, but the teacher said as many as we'd like", answered Lee. "It's due for Monday."

"There's nothing heavy or stupid about this sort of assignment. Alright, I can't list off everyone – that would be cheating – but I can give you some anecdotes and names, and you can take notes, put it all together, and then it'll look like you did it yourself. Does that sound good?"

"Peachy, considering how little I know about my family", said Lee.

"Yeah", said Genine, concerned. "I get the feeling I should take part in this somewhere, too."

"Just don't confuse me too much", said Lee.

Some noises in the smaller garage revealed that Michelle and Lauranne had come back from their cycling trip.

"Wow. Family gatherings are all the rage these days", said Lauranne, looking at everybody.

"Maybe I should've stayed away", said Michelle.

"Oh, no", said Lauranne to Michelle. "Then I'd miss you too much."

"Aw, how sweet", said Katy. "You must be related."

"Aw, such sappy moments", said Lee, smiling widely. "I feel another song coming on."

"Homework first, songwriting later", said Genine. "So, where have you two been?"

"Out", said Lauranne.

"Cycling", said Michelle.

"Visiting Gran", said Lauranne.

"And someone who Lauranne..." said Michelle with a wry smile.

"Hey!" said Lauranne, slightly side-kicking Michelle.

Michelle laughed.

"Again?" asked Lee. "Are you for real with him, Lo?"

"Hm-hm, you never know", said Lauranne, coyly.

"Speaking of knowing things, do either of you two know where M'ma was born? Katy and I are coming up blank on that one", said Genine.

"Ennis", responded Michelle, matter-of-factly. "County Clare. Why?"

"Family tree", said Lee.

Lauranne looked at Michelle curiously. "So that's why you asked me about the Cliffs of Moher. I had that assignment, too. Nobody knew or remembered, so I just wrote 'Ireland'."

"I think we all had that assignment", said Michelle.

"I think we all had the same Social Studies teacher", said Katy.

"I didn't", said Genine. "*Vive les différences.*"

"Speaking of French", said Lee, "what about Grandpa?"

"I just wrote 'Quebec' for much the same reasons", said Lauranne. "The teacher said I didn't need to put the accent in there when writing in English."

Michelle spoke up: "Lachute, Quebec."

"Where did they get married?" asked Lee.

"Montreal."

"Okay, and you and you", Lee asked, pointing to Michelle and Katy, "were born in Montreal too, right?"

"Bayline", said Katy.

"Yup. Likewise", said Michelle. "Your Aunt Eileen, too."

"Were you?" asked Lauranne. "I thought you were all born in Montreal."

"Nope", said Genine. "Da transferred to the Royal Signal Corps near Bayline after getting his engineering degree in 1963. I hardly remember anything about Montreal. I was, like, three when we moved here. The other three kids came after that. What I'd like to know, Michelle, is how did you know where exactly M'ma was born? I didn't even know that."

"Well...", Michelle started.

"Hang on", Lauranne interrupted. "I want to hear this, but I'm thirsty. Does anyone else want something to drink?"

"Wine!" said Michelle and Katy, simultaneously.

"That was quick", said Genine.

"OJ for me", said Lee.

"Mineral water", said Genine, still looking concerned.

"Red or white for you two?", asked Lauranne.

"Red", they said, again simultaneously, this time a little amazed at each other.

"So, Michelle", said Genine, looking at her curiously. "M'ma?"

"Oh that? Well, there's nothing much to it, really." Michelle repeated what she'd said to Lauranne earlier about her mother telling all about "the Old Country."

Lauranne came back from the kitchen, tray of drinks in hands. She placed it on the coffee and grabbed an unmarked green bottle with a ceramic stop in it. "What's this?" she asked, Maureen-like.

Lee started smiling.

Lauranne unstopped the bottle and took a huge whiff of it, making a bizarre face in the process. "Ah for the luvva...!"

"What is that?" asked Michelle, faking curiosity.

"Yeah, that's a curious-looking bottle", said Katy, insincerely. She took the bottle and pretended to smell it. "Pew! A night of regret", she said, still insincere. She passed it quickly to Michelle, who also pretended to smell it.

"Oh! Your kids'll never talk to you again!" Michelle said, slightly shaking her head.

Lee laughed silently but Genine was unaware of this. Michelle and Katy managed not to betray Lee. Genine took the bottle and stopped it up again. "It's...", she started, then bit her lip, followed by a deep breath, "...for a client. Special brew."

"I'm sure it's special", said Michelle, raising her eyebrows. "I'm sure it'll especially kill the bacteria in anything."

Genine looked at Michelle and Katy curiously, and then she turned around quickly to look at Lee, who'd regained her composure just as quickly. "Hmm."

"Okay", said Lee. "I think I have enough. It's passable."

"What's passable?" asked Genine.

"My homework assignment. I think I've learnt quite a lot about my family today", said Lee, raising her eyebrows a bit.

Katy and Michelle looked innocently in opposite directions and sipped their wines.

The Shock

Coffee drained quietly from basket into pot. Michelle was up early again. She'd prepared a full pot in case anyone needed some jolt juice.

She thought it rather quiet within the house. Too quiet, in fact. Not even the cat was stirring.

"Pretty quiet Sunday", muttered Michelle.

Her dreams were anything but quiet: They were now more vivid, more defined, than the night before. This wasn't a good thing. She wanted them to stay where they'd originated and not come calling whenever she put head to pillow. Last night, she gasped "No!" loudly while thrusting her fist into the air, waking up suddenly upon feeling like she was about to strain an arm muscle. She wasn't 100% sure about what had happened but couldn't go back to sleep for another hour after that.

Then she remembered something: She was the only one here today. She checked the house room by room. Katy had gone out to a work-related party. Lauranne had biked home before supper time. Genine and Lee went home late. And Michelle hadn't seen Eileen since the day before last – and wherever Eileen was, so were her boys. Michelle even checked the rec-room downstairs, which hadn't seen much use since her mother died, except by the cat.

"Smells it, too."

It was strange to hear no sound within the house. It was like everyone had abandoned it and forgotten to wake her up. Michelle was easily startled when the coffee maker perked out its last drops. Aside from her breathing, the coffee maker's gurgling was the only other appreciable noise around.

Coffee in a cup made no noise. Neither did Michelle. She settled into a quiet moment, when she could sense the presence of everyone who'd ever lived or visited here. She could see her father, in good health, and her mother, alive; her brother Max entering the house, on leave, dressed proudly, all in uniform; her mother scolding her father over something he made light of, noticing him winking at one of his kids, and then smacking him on the arm for being a joker; Maureen having come from the hospital with twins, so small, so vulnerable, the latest additions in an already large family; herself and Katy as teens, chatting about this song or group or that movie or what others were wearing at high-school; Maureen or Genine coming over with family on occasion, special or no; and Lauranne being dropped off to be babysat by Michelle.

She could also sense loss when her mother received news that Max' life was taken in an explosion where he was stationed. It was true that there was always a risk of losing someone if they served in the military, but it was a common belief that such news arrived during times of war, not peace. It was easy to forget that death could happen in peace-time, too, and not just in the armed forces. Her mother wasn't in the military: Cancer took her.

Thoughts of deaths in the family reminded her of a near-death experience she'd had not long ago. Her view of this house became shrouded, and it felt too comfortable to remain in this state of pondering death.

She was startled once more, this time by scratching at the patio door. It was Robespierre.

"What was it Maureen said before? Wet food twice a week. Wednesday & Sunday. Today's Sunday. Where's the canned food?"

Michelle looked where Eileen had found the dog's kibble the other day. She found two cans. She began to wonder if Maureen was supposed to take care of the dog's supplies, or if it had been her father before he went into the hospital.

"No matter. The dog needs feeding now, so deal with him now. His water, too. That'll need changing."

Robespierre was quite happy to be getting his food and water. He jumped up and down on his front legs in joy, almost causing Michelle to drop his dishes in laughter. She popped open a folding chair, brought her cup of coffee outside, and sat down to watch Robespierre eat, wondering whether she could ever be as content in her own life. As he ate, she saw a few birds flying in to peck at the corn cobs her father had pegged to a post. If Robespierre noticed the birds, he was otherwise too occupied with eating to bother yapping at them. She looked at the patio window and noticed Meenoo peering out at the birds, appearing to meow.

"No, Meenoo, no birds for you this morning", said Michelle, imitating her father.

She supposed that she'd have to feed the cat, too, but for now, he seemed content meowing from behind a glass door at the birds. His Furriness could wait.

Michelle listened to the noise outside – a little noisier than inside but not by much. She heard the din of traffic off of two intersecting provincial highways and other connecting main roads. Steel wheels on jointed rails clackety-clacked, getting louder with each passing second. Rattling sounds also came from the train – Michelle's father would've said, *"Sounds empty. Probably going up to get more coal"* – bound for the BC interior. The engineer sounded the horn right near where North Circle Road met the Valley Road and again at Truman's Corners. This 100-car beast of a train had probably tied up traffic in too many places to count. Within 10 minutes, it would pass in its entirety and leave behind the fields and rises of Hatzquiam for the easy curves of the Fraser River, ultimately bound for mining territory's mountainous terrain. Its already-full counterpart was probably bound for the coast, most likely to pass through Hatzquiam around supper time. That train, too, would tie up traffic.

Nothing much around here had really changed since her high-school days, at least in terms of routines and schedules. Michelle found all this oddly comforting.

Robespierre woke Michelle from her contemplation, his meal finished, dog leash in mouth.

"Da's trained you well", spoke Michelle, softly.

Hooking leash to dog collar, Michelle wondered why he even needed one. They were far enough from any city, where dogs tended to be kept in apartments or small houses with little or no yard space and needed to be walked at least two times a day. And Robespierre had a whole back yard to run around and do his business in. But she remembered that her father loved to get out and walk, and taking the dog provided as good an excuse as any. Over time, the dog probably got used to the routine. Michelle wondered who walked the dog after her father went into the hospital.

"Probably Genine."

She wasn't sure how far or where to walk him. She decided to go up the road til it dead-ended a click away and then turn back to the house. Getting to the end of the road, she noticed a signpost indicating a trail going up the hill from the cul-de-sac.

"I don't remember this being here before."

Robespierre's ears perked up, and he started yapping. Someone was coming down the trail. Out of the woods came an older woman with a black lab on the leash. The lab barked at Robespierre, while the older woman held on tightly to her dog's leash.

"Oh, ca'm down, Markie! Heel!", said the woman, still approaching.

As the dogs approached each other, barking was replaced by sniffing around.

"Sorry 'bout that. He gets all excited when he sees another dog", said the woman.

"Sounds normal. No worries", said Michelle, figuring the other woman's accent to be somewhere from the UK. "Say, how long has this trail been here? This is the first time I've seen it."

"That? Oh, fer a w'ile now. Are ye new here?"

"Actually, I went to high-school here. That's my father's house just down the road."

"Oh, that one? Pretty loud hammarin' there the other night."

Michelle blanched and got awkward. "You heard that?"

"Well, I live just up the hill, at the other end of the trail, so I should bloody well think so. Yer father was hammarin' loud enough that the dead probably heard it."

"Oh, that was probably one of my sisters. My father's in the hospital right now, so I'm sure it couldn't've been him. I'll tell her to keep the windows closed in the future. Sorry about that."

The woman's face softened a bit. "I'm sorry to hear 'bout yer father. I hope he gets well soon."

"I figure he will. He's a strong man. He's just had a setback, that's all."

"Well, I guess we cannot control everything in life. We can only manage what's there. And ya say ya went to the big high-school here?"

"Yep. Hatz High. Class of '86."

"My nephew went there in the mid-1980s. I don't remember when he grad-oo-ated. I came back yesterday from Montree-al where he just finished university. It was the darnedest thing. 'Bout a month ago, I got a letter from someone out there, saying she knew him and asking me would I like to come out to see him. My husband, God bless his dear soul, passed beyond about eight months back, and I've been alone since, 'cept fer Markie, of course. So, when I got that letter, something about it made sense. Maybe I had to go see my nephew again. It'd been too long. Him and my husband, y'see, they never really got along, but he's always been kin, my nephew. I reckoned to go see him 'fore it was too late. And he'll be comin' out here in September for a visit."

Michelle sensed regret in the older woman's voice, perhaps of missed chances and years gone by without even having made friends with her neighbours. Michelle wondered if the woman's late husband had something to do with that. Without asking, Michelle would never know.

"In any case", said the woman, "part of me hopes he'll come back here to live." She looked up the hill. "'Round back o' that grove, that's where I live. But legally, it's me nephew's. Me mum willed it to him."

"What happened?" asked Michelle.

"Like I said, 'im and my husband never really got along. But my nephew had a distaste for courtrooms and lawyers, so rather'n stay and fight for it, he just upped and left. When I saw 'im last week, he said he preferred to rove and live freely."

Michelle let out a little smile. She liked what the older woman was saying about her nephew. "Do you think he'll reclaim the house?"

"Not sure. I could see it in his eyes, tho'; that look of someone who's gettin' tired of wanderin'. Saw that in my baby brother a while back. All ready to settle down like. Better late than never, y'know?"

"Did your brother ever settle down?"

"No. No. He drowned while fishing up north. I reckon he never had the chance to get beyond thinking about it. Yep, yeh. Him & my nephew were close. I s'pose anything's possible with my nephew, but my gut tells me he's not quite ready to settle down yet. Still, it'll be nice to have him out here again."

"When was he out here last?"

"Christmas. Seven years ago. It wasn't a good time for him. Him & my husband..."

"...didn't get along?"

The older woman smiled. "Sad but true. Both of'em could've had a better Christmas."

"I'm sure." There was a short silence. "I should probably take him back home."

"Oh, I probably bored ye with all that."

"No, not at all. I guess I'm still trying to re-adjust to life around here. I also haven't walked a dog in a good long while. I almost forgot what it was like. Didn't I, Robespierre?"

"Interestin' name fer a dog."

"It's what my father named him. I guess he was feeling original that day."

"Well, I'm walking down to Truman's Corners."

"I'm going in that direction, too."

Michelle still wondered as she and the older woman walked away from the cul-de-sac if this was enough walking for Robespierre. Sure enough, he barked just after they passed the driveway, telling Michelle that was it for walkies. Michelle and the older woman said their goodbyes, and Michelle started taking Robespierre towards the side of the house. Michelle stopped and looked at the older woman walking along with Markie in the lead, thinking that she could enjoy this kind of life. She'd always liked dogs, as well as walking and hiking, and this was a good combination.

"Maybe I can make some money walking people's dogs. Maybe a regular part-time blow-off job that I could do in my sleep to help make ends meet? That'd round things off quite nicely."

She smiled. She liked this place but wasn't really sure that she wanted to stay here long-term. Anything farther out in the valley and it might prove too quiet for her. Suburbia sucked, and Hatzquiam was becoming more and more suburban. It had certainly developed quite a bit since her high-school days – perhaps a bit too much. She wondered how long it would be before her father's house and property went on the market – if he lived another two decades, probably not any time soon. Still, the thought of a significant part of her youth being sold off and later demolished, the property subdivided, with a whole raft of cookie-cutter houses built over it all made her feel kind of sad inside. She'd seen other cities' outer edges, where once stood villages and farms, be engulfed in always-expanding urban sprawl. She loathed the idea of it happening here. Perhaps her staying here and fighting against over-development might stop it from happening. She could dream.

She was about to take Robespierre around the side of the house when a taxi pulled into the driveway. Out popped Katy, tired-looking and dishevelled but otherwise in fine form. Katy paid the cabbie and then saw Michelle approaching with Robespierre. Michelle thought that Robespierre might chase the parting taxi, but no luck: He was too well trained and behaved to do that.

"Morning, Sunshine", said Michelle.

"Morning y'self", said Katy.

"I don't remember the last time I saw you without any make-up on."

"Last year of elementary school. Mine."

"Must've been quite the...?"

"...party? Yeah. It was a party. Out in Bayline, of all places."

Michelle looked at Katy curiously. "Do you still know anybody there? That was a long time ago."

"Oh no. Nobody from that part of my life. No, someone from the studio decided to throw a big wing-ding at his place. Nice digs, too: On the hill, overlooking the bay; big patio; pool, too."

"Sounds posh."

"Was, yeah. Lots of important types there, too. I got into a big convo with the head of Make-up..." Katy stopped. She shivered. "Do you mind if we go inside?"

"No probs. I've just gotta take Robespierre around back. Could you let me in through the back patio door?"

"Sure, if you lent me your key."

Michelle hid feelings of puzzlement as she reached into her pocket and pulled out her key. Michelle wondered why Katy didn't have a key. All the kids had had house keys from age 10 on. Michelle figured that her father had changed the locks at least once after her mother died. Michelle wanted to sort this out, but later, when she figured on checking how many of the others had their own keys. Perhaps Katy not having a key was just an oversight, or perhaps she'd merely lost hers.

A minute later, Robespierre was running around the yard, his leash now hung up in its usual place, and Michelle was back inside, preparing a pot of coffee for two. Katy was getting some stuff out of the fridge to make a grilled bacon and cheese sandwich but had to sit down before she could take anything out of its package.

"Hey", said Michelle, "let me do that for you. You take it easy, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks. Sorry. I'm just tired, hungry, and..."

"...and hungover, yeah, I remember how you looked the other day, though that was worse."

"I think that was the worst I've ever been. Today's a picnic by comparison. Still..."

"I'm sure. Hot sauce on your sandwich?"

"Yeh, might be nice. Sure."

"So, Make-up department?"

"Hmm."

"Last night? At the party?"

"What? Oh yeah, that. Yeah, I was telling her of how I'd done make-up in some studios before. She said no promises but told me she might be able to have me do make-up here."

"Sounds great", said Michelle, putting the bacon into the smaller frying pan. "But what about acting?"

Katy looked down at the counter. "Extra work is good, but I don't have any real acting gigs. Plus, being an extra can be boring at times. I'm not sure that I want to do that anymore. Maybe I'll do community theatre on the side, but make-up is something I'm good at, so why not?"

"Sure", said Michelle, nodding. "So, how much else of the evening do you remember?"

"Not much after that. I recall laughing a lot. I know: It sounds strange, right?"

"We've laughed a lot, you & I. So no, it's not strange to me."

"Fair enough. After, I passed out on a couch. When? I don't recall. I felt a blanket put over me at some point, but I went back to sleep after that. Next thing I knew, I was calling for a taxi, saying 'Thanks, it was fun' to the owner, and letting myself out of his house. Forty minutes later, I was home."

Michelle put the fried bacon into the sandwich and plopped that into another frying pan. She looked at the coffee maker and took the pot out. "Cuppa?"

"Yeh, I'd love one."

"So, how do you take it?"

"Take what? Partying?"

"No, silly. Your coffee."

"Like my wardrobe, and sweet as a stolen kiss."

"Eh?"

Katy smiled. "Black, with two sugars."

Michelle smiled and prepped Katy's coffee. She then took an empty cup for herself and poured a bit of milk into it, after putting the cup into the microwave for 20 seconds. She gave Katy her coffee and managed to give the sandwich a flip before taking her own cup out and pouring coffee in it.

"Never seen that before", said Katy.

"Yeah, I know. I can be a wonder in the kitchen at times", said Michelle.

"No, you clown: with the coffee."

"Oh that? It's a little trick I learned while Down Under."

"Oh. Did Mr. Faithless show you that?"

"Ugh. Yeah. Him. It was him."

"How long were you engaged to him?"

"Too long. But that's what I got for going out with a dysfunctional travelling musician."

"I'm sure they're not all like that."

"No. Just the dysfunctional ones. Just the one I hooked up with."

"Well, that metal guitarist I went out with in LA wasn't exactly high-fidelity, if you pardon the pun. Oh, no. He used to lose his prick in someone else's hole. A fuck-buddy in every city, I'm sure."

Michelle laughed at Katy's choice of words. "We're not all that different then, are we?"

"You gave your guy too much benefit of the doubt and still got engaged to him. I figured my guy capable of losing it whenever he came within proximity of a 38D, so I dumped him. But you know what they say? Live and learn. You lived to tell the story."

"Yeah. Okay, here you go: One bacon & grilled cheese sandwich, just like M'ma used to make."

Katy tore into her sandwich and slurped her coffee.

"Hey", said Michelle, "try to eat that in more than one bite, okay? And definitely chew before swallowing."

Katy looked at Michelle and smiled. "Thanks for this. It brings back memories."

"Of M'ma's cooking? Yeah, it does. Any time I make one for myself, I think of her."

Katy finished chewing a bite and then swallowed. "Someone not long ago told me I looked like M'ma. Do you think so?"

Michelle looked at Katy up and down and then thought about it for a few seconds. "More than any one of us, I think. Yeah. You're about the same height, same build. Aside from Max, you're the only one of us with blue eyes. I didn't think I looked like anyone in our family until Da once told me that I look like Tante Jeanne when she was younger."

"I saw a photo of her once. You do, kind of. That might explain your middle name."

Michelle smiled. "Not sure. But I know we're never clones of any parent, or any relative for that matter. Each generation is a variation on the last, whether the variation be minor or major."

"Didn't one of your exes tell you that back in your last year at high-school?"

"Yeah", Michelle smiled. "Him."

"You still think of him?"

"No", Michelle lied.

"Hey Maureen", said Michelle, answering the phone. "How're things?"

"Good. Good. What's up there?"

"Nothing much. Just cleaning up in the kitchen right now. Say, who buys the dog food these days?"

"Why?"

"Well, the dry food is almost gone. There's maybe a cup left."

"Probably Da. Is there any canned food left?"

Michelle looked to be sure. "Yeah. One can."

"Okay. I'll stop off on the way and stock up. Is anyone else there?"

"Just Katy, but she's sleeping."

"No Eileen?"

"Nope. I haven't seen or heard from her for a while."

"Damn", muttered Maureen. "Michelle, do you have a pen & paper handy? If so, take down this number."

Michelle scribbled it all down. "Whose number is this?"

"Eileen's house in Mount Kitson. She might answer, or maybe it will be her husband. You'll just have to take a chance."

"Right. I imagine you'll come here, right?"

"Yeh. See you soon."

Michelle hung up. She looked at the piece of paper with Eileen's number on it and dreaded the thought of calling. She couldn't put her finger on why – simply a gut feeling. She had no way of knowing who would answer the phone there: Eileen, or her husband. Michelle didn't know him all that well. Considering how things had been recently between Eileen and her husband, this put Michelle in an awkward situation. She wished that Katy was awake.

"Katy knows how to handle difficult situations like this, but I shouldn't wake her up."

No answer. Michelle hoped that nothing bad had happened to Eileen. She felt it all strange the way Maureen spoke, as if something were about to happen to Eileen. This concerned Michelle. Eileen had already lost one house and almost lost her two children. Recently, Eileen had had problems with her husband, resulting in her coming over to their father's place, kids in tow. No, Michelle didn't like the feel of this one bit.

After a few minutes, she decided to try again. This time, someone picked up.

"Hello?" asked a man.

"Oh hi, is Eileen there?" asked Michelle.

"Who's this?" asked the man, quite curtly.

"Her sister, Michelle", she responded sternly.

"Michelle! Ah good! Do me a favour? When you see her, could you please talk some sense into her?"

Michelle wanted to quip about this but thought it neither the time nor the place. "About...?"

"It was all a misunderstanding. Nothing happened at that last convention."

"I'm sure nothing did", said Michelle, puzzled, her eyebrows knitting. "Say, has Eileen been there recently, at your place?"

"Yeah, but she left an hour after I returned. Please, talk to her if you see her. I miss her and the boys."

Michelle thought about it for a second. "When I see her, I'll tell her we spoke. Bye." Michelle could hear Eileen's husband trying to say something as she hung up the phone but she couldn't be bothered to listen to it.

"That's the type of situation I prefer to avoid. But the die's been cast and all that."

Now all she could do was hope everything was okay. Michelle felt alone again. Maureen and Eileen were out there, somewhere away from the house. Katy was sleeping. Genine was probably at her house. And her father was still in the hospital. Even Robespierre had decided to take a nap.

"Yup. Pretty quiet Sunday", muttered Michelle.

"Michelle? Some help, please", said Maureen, almost bellowing, carting in provisions for the dog and everyone else. It had started raining before she arrived, which made unloading the groceries all the more annoying and unpleasant.

It was once Maureen and Michelle had put away everything that Maureen asked: "Any news from Eileen?"

Michelle told Maureen what she knew.

"Goddamn. I wish I knew where she was", said Maureen, getting more stressed by the second.

"Maureen", said Michelle, looking Maureen straight in the eyes and placing her hands on her shoulders, "Eileen will probably come back here and be alright. I'm sure she'll have tonnes to say sooner or later. No pressure on her, okay?" Michelle wasn't sure if playing Katy would work. Only Katy could do Katy well. Michelle was Michelle.

Maureen relaxed a bit.

"Besides, you – yes, you – need to unclench", said Michelle, reverting to form.

Maureen looked at Michelle with a what-the-hell. "Unclench?"

"Yeah, like, stop worrying so much, don't be so tense, let your hair down or something. When was the last time you literally let your hair down?"

Maureen looked a little puzzled. "In the shower, if you must know."

"Well, unless I install a video camera in your shower, then how am I supposed to know what you look like when your hair's down. It's not like I have Katy's memory or anything."

Maureen removed the clips one by one from her hair, letting her hair fall over her shoulders and running her fingers through it all to work out any knots.

"A hairbrush might work better", said Michelle, smiling. "My, but what beautiful hair you have. I'd almost forgotten."

Maureen smiled and let out a little laugh.

"You're like a taller version of M'ma", said Michelle, still smiling. "Look, I'm worried about Eileen, too – maybe not in the way you are, but worry is still worry. It's a burden that's better shared than kept to oneself."

"Fair enough. While we're at it, let's share the burden of preparing supper for tonight."

"Sure. What's the occasion?"

"Family supper", said Maureen, not flinching that Michelle had forgotten this.

"Do we still do that?" asked Michelle with a big smile.

"The first Sunday of every month", said Maureen, smiling back.

A bit later, Katy walked into the kitchen, bleary-eyed but not so much that she couldn't see Maureen and Michelle getting out things for meal preparation.

"Hey, sleepy-pants", said Michelle. "All better now?"

"Depends on how you define 'better'. But yeah, I'll live. Hey Maureen. I don't think I've seen you with your hair down in years."

"I don't think I've seen you without make-up in years", quipped Maureen.

"Touché. Anyway, it looks nice." Katy stood next to Maureen and then turned to Michelle and smiled. "Now who do you think looks more like M'ma? Me or Maureen?"

Michelle had a look on her face of wavering, going back and forth, eyes squinting, lips bunched. Her hand motioned *comme-ci-comme-ça*. "Eh. Six of one, half a dozen of the other."

Katy partly smiled. "Not really an answer there."

"I think that's what they call a non-answer", said Maureen.

"I think you're right. So, monthly Sunday supper?" asked Katy. "Care for some more helping hands?"

"Sure", said Maureen, putting her hair into a loose ponytail. "Cut some veg for the sauce?"

As soon as Katy positioned herself at the counter and started cutting, she and Michelle were chatting up a storm. Maureen felt that she would never completely understand her two youngest sisters.

At some point, Michelle broke from her conversation with Katy to ask Maureen about the trail at the end of the road and how long it had been there.

"Officially? A few years now. Why do you ask?" said Maureen

"I was walking Robespierre in that direction earlier today. It was the first I'd seen a sign indicating a trail."

"Did you walk the dog up the trail?"

"I was going to, and then down came someone else with her dog. A black lab."

"Named Markie?"

"Yeah. That's his name. How did you know?" she asked, a little puzzled.

"You're not the only one to take Robespierre for a walk", said Maureen, smiling. "That's Mrs Thomas. She lives up the hill. She can see from her place when someone is walking up the road. I think she's lonely."

"Well, she told me her husband died a while back, so I'm sure she's all alone in that house with no one to talk to, except her dog. I don't know that I'd want to live like that. Do you know if Da has ever run into her?"

"Probably, though if he ever meets anyone on the road while walking the dog, he never mentions names. You know Da: strong, silent type."

"Except that time at the old house when Genine accidentally dropped a hammer on his foot and he was wearing loafers", said Michelle.

"Yeah, then was more the bellowing bear", added Katy.

"He wasn't so silent at that point, eh?" quipped Michelle.

"I'd never seen Genine so fast and nimble", said Katy. "How long did she stay up in the attic for?"

"Long enough for Da to cool down. It probably helped matters that she'd managed to pull up the ladder and lock it before he arrived", said Michelle.

Maureen smiled, trying not to laugh. "She's always been a quick thinker. Sometimes I wonder if Da's jealous of her."

Michelle looked at Maureen puzzled. "Da? Jealous? Never."

"Well, they're both good troubleshooters, but Genine is quicker on the draw", said Katy. "You have to admit."

Michelle gave a little smile of recognition to Katy's point. "Maybe not having been in the military gave Genine that edge? I mean, not so many orders to follow."

"Well, that's Da. Once a soldier, always a soldier. Up at the crack of 5AM and out the door soon after, dog on leash. No stops, no excuses", said Maureen.

"I think the dog looks forward to it", said Michelle. "He hopped up and brought his own leash to me, quite insistent that I walk him. Da's trained him well."

Meenoo wandered into the kitchen and started meowing.

"Look who else is insistent", said Katy.

"Shit. I forgot all about him", said Michelle.

Maureen got out and opened a can of cat food. Meenoo went quickly to Maureen's legs and meowed. "*Meenoo, Meenoo, Meenoo*", Maureen said, rushing towards the stairs leading to the rec room in the basement, cat bounding after.

"That's the cat's name?" asked Katy, blankly.

"Yup", said Michelle. "Da named him."

"Say no more", said Katy, laughing a little. "So, I take it that walking the dog was good for you?"

"Yeah", said Michelle, wistfully.

Katy looked at Michelle curiously. She could always get a good sense of someone just being around them, but she had difficulty reading Michelle, who at times seemed relaxed, relieved, and at home, but uneasy, cooped up, and eager to be somewhere else the next. Sometimes, she was both at once. Katy wanted to say something but chose not to. She chose instead to make awkward small talk, something she was not terribly good at.

"Was the dog well-behaved? Like, did he bark at everything that moved?"

"Yes, for the first question. And yes but only at that other dog", answered Michelle.

Michelle got the impression that Katy wasn't exactly comfortable asking those questions, and like she hadn't wanted to in the first place. This got Michelle concerned.

Maureen came back into the kitchen. "Well, that's another animal all fed and contented", she said, "unless Da's got a pet rabbit around that I'm not aware of."

"Oh yeah, he did, but Genine & I ate him for supper last night", said Michelle.

Katy looked up suddenly, wide-eyed, and then looked at Michelle. "You didn't!"

Maureen pursed her lips, trying not to show any emotion.

"Well, why wouldn't we? Jee said Da called him 'Supper', so why not? Why have Supper if you're not going to eat it?", asked Michelle, seriously. After a few seconds of stunned silence, Michelle turned to Maureen. "Is there a camera around here? I need to get Katy's face on film."

Maureen burst out laughing.

Katy pursed her lips angrily and smacked her hand down on the counter. "Oh, fer Christ's sake, Michelle!"

"Okay, now she looks more like M'ma", said Maureen. "Quick, hide all the wooden spoons."

Michelle laughed loudly.

Katy looked at Maureen and started to laugh. "Thanks? I think?" she said, unsure. "Seriously, don't ever do that again!" She went subdued very quickly. "I like rabbits."

"Seriously? No, there aren't any other animals around the house", said Michelle. "And as far as I know, Da doesn't have a rabbit."

"He doesn't", said a voice from the hall. It was Eileen, sunglasses on, kids in tow, looking a little worse than Katy earlier that day. "Michelle's just being Michelle."

Michelle went over and hugged Eileen for the second time in a week. "We've got to stop parting company like this. Otherwise, hugging might just become a habit between us."

"Funny. We must be related", said Eileen.

"So, sunglasses when it's raining outside?" asked Michelle, hesitant to know the answer.

"Yeah", said Eileen. "Y'know. For when you slip on a bar of soap and your face hits the table on the way down, all because you're clumsy? Well, that's not what happened to me."

Michelle could feel her temper rising. She wondered if she could imagine her soon-to-be ex-brother-in-law six feet under hard enough that it would become a reality. Less blood on her hands that way, she figured.

Maureen got concerned and removed Eileen's sunglasses to inspect the damage. She went from head chef to head nurse in one second flat and looked around for a clean towel and some ice.

Eileen spoke to Maureen. "What was that you said to me before my wedding? Something about me marrying a child?" Eileen laughed a little then took a deep breath. "But what did I know? I wanted my beautiful, just-so wedding. He was so charming." Eileen bit her lip, looked down, and looked back up again. "I don't know how I could've been so stupid."

Katy spoke up. "How were you supposed to know?"

"How were any of us supposed to know?" asked Michelle.

"I remember, once, Granddad Malone warned me to choose wisely in romance", said Maureen, applying the improvised ice-pack to Eileen's right eye. "This may sting." Eileen's eye twitched. "He said, 'Love is blind and walks hand-in-hand with insanity'."

Eileen managed a little laugh at that. "Yeah."

"And we were all a little off in the last decade, weren't we?" said Michelle. "Everyone wanted their own Charles-and-Diana-like wedding, and to live happily ever after and all that. I almost went down that road myself."

"Me, too", said Katy, shrugging her shoulders.

Maureen looked slightly alarmed at both Michelle and Katy. Her attention returned to Eileen's eye. "Okay, it's not too bad. Just keep applying this on occasion. You'll want the swelling to go down and the colour to disappear, not the eyeball to get frozen solid. Fortunately, you're the only assault case I've had to deal with in this family."

Eileen looked down and then looked at Michelle. Katy did the same peripherally. Maureen looked at each of them looking at Michelle and then looked worriedly at Michelle.

Michelle's eyes went wide. She wasn't sure what to say to Maureen. Michelle didn't want to tell Maureen anything, wanting to avoid a judgemental attitude or being treated like a baby. She appreciated anyone looking out for her, but in Maureen's case, Michelle felt she didn't need a second mother. She smiled, attempting to hide things, and wanted to say something but wasn't sure what.

"Ma?" said Brendan, having come back from putting his things in the guest room, with Carl behind him.

"Nephew saves the day", thought Michelle.

Katy took Michelle's hand and smiled at her.

Eileen looked down at her oldest son. "Hm?"

"Everything's gonna be alright. We'll live."

Eileen hugged both her boys.

"I think two good things came out of your marriage, Eileen", said Katy.

Eileen looked up to see Katy smiling and pointing at her two boys. Eileen smiled at Katy then hugged her two boys tighter.

Maureen looked at Katy and smiled. She turned to Michelle, concerned, but still smiled.

Eileen then looked back at Maureen, strangely. "Maureen? What's with your hair?"

The Release

Michelle was coming out of her room, after having changed clothes for supper, when she saw Maureen, arms crossed, standing in the hall.

Maureen smiled a little at Michelle and then spoke softly. "Is there something you'd like to tell me, Michelle?"

Michelle thought about it for a few seconds. "I'd like to tell you many things, but there are only so many hours in the day, no?" she said, laughing a little.

"I have a bit of time now."

"I'm sure you do, and thanks", said Michelle, walking towards the stairs.

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm the only one you won't tell?"

Michelle stopped, her back still turned to Maureen. If she told Maureen about what had happened to her in Europe, then Maureen would most likely say it was Michelle's fault. If Michelle told her about her nightmares and wrote it off as merely causing her not to sleep very well, then Maureen would get all motherly and treat Michelle like a helpless baby. It was at this point that Michelle preferred Maureen to be a sister like the others and not a substitute mother.

Michelle didn't want to say anything stupid or react too quickly. But right now, she wasn't sure how to deal with this, with Maureen, except directly, bluntly.

"In a nutshell, I was robbed, knifed, and beaten, and I came within an inch of being raped. There. Satisfied?" Michelle's eyes went wide and her face showed distress but she composed herself immediately afterward. She smiled then turned and walked down the stairs. Her conscience was starting to doubt having told Maureen anything but her dignity wouldn't hear of it. She didn't look back at Maureen once. She figured that what was done was done and that there was no taking back those words.

Maureen stood in the hall, mouth slightly agape, somewhat shocked to have heard this, and so pointedly, too. She'd always wondered just what she was going to say in the event something like this happened to one of her younger sisters. Right now, she was without words. Whether to Michelle or to anyone else, she couldn't even think of what to say.

Michelle thought about the family supper last night and how it was good to have the whole family there, even Robert, who was finally released from hospital and brought back home by Genine. She felt it was like old times again. This brought her a certain degree of comfort.

The banter still flowed freely at the dinner table, sometimes veering into pointed comments but more-often-than-not staying the light and jokey course.

Lauranne revealed that she was now dating the guy she had talked about before, to which Lee muttered how it was a poorly kept secret. Maureen got concerned that this "boy" would distract

Lauranne from her studies. Robert stared at Maureen for a good long while, not smiling, before Maureen decided it wasn't wise to press the issue.

Maureen and Michelle had hardly spoken a word to each other that evening. Michelle didn't want Maureen to react in either extreme but didn't intend for her to shut her up. All the same, Michelle wasn't sure what more she could say to Maureen, figuring she'd effectively killed any further conversation between them, at least for the next few days.

Eileen broke the news that she was filing for divorce. She'd announced it before but now was more convinced of it than ever. Robert occasionally looked over to Eileen, who was still wearing sunglasses. He didn't feel happy about this situation. He'd thought Eileen's husband was okay but not overly impressive. His mindset had always been that Eileen could marry whomever she wanted to, as long as she was happy. Right now, he felt that something bad should happen to Eileen's husband, but he had to calm himself so as not to get stressed out over her situation. He had his health to think about.

She also announced that she was going into business with two other hairdressers and that their shop was going to be in or near Bayline. This made Robert smile.

At some point, the question came up about Katy and how she knew when to come home when she did. It seemed that everyone had been out of contact with her. Even Michelle had no clue where she'd been.

"I'd like to say that I'm psychic, but then I'd be lying, which would be out of character for me", said Katy, smiling. Smiling was something she had done more often since coming back home. It was something she hadn't done a lot of since before teenage.

Robert looked at Katy and smiled. Many of her mannerisms reminded him of his departed wife.

Katy looked around at everybody, gone quiet with smiles by then, and then looked at Lee.

Lee almost laughed. "There was no harm in it." She turned to her mother and said, "Well, you told me I should get a pen-pal. And Aunt Katy's been a good influence on my writing."

"You write very well", said Katy. "I don't think I've influenced you that much."

Lee just smiled. "You're being modest."

Robert looked at his granddaughter and smiled. He felt proud of her for taking the initiative on something like that.

There was some apprehension around the dinner table after that, like everyone had kind of neglected Katy in their own way and should've done more to keep in touch with her.

For Michelle's part, there had also been a certain degree of apprehension about just being there that evening as well as to her entire return home, and this was something which grew into a mild form of resentment the more she thought about it.

"But why? I should be happy to be back and just live with that."

Even being in her old room, she wasn't quite free of this resentment. At the same time, it did feel comfortable, almost cocoon-like: regenerative, reinvigorating. It helped her to forget what had gone on some weeks back.

But this had never been enough. The nightmares had bothered her. They'd been bothering her since around the time the jet lag started to wear off. Sometimes, these nightmares were about her last days in Europe. At other times, the nightmares were of her not being there to save either Max or her mother from dying. There were also bizarre dreams which seemed to her like a culmination of several stories she'd heard while travelling, like one of a man she once knew who always carried a knife on him but in the end died from fighting a monster in his own nightmares, his body found slumped in and tied to a chair, with large claw marks on him, bled dry. But there were also dreams of questionable state: like of Aidan, who, in one dream, had given his hand and said to her that he'd chase all her nightmares away. She woke up from that dream and started to cry, but she wasn't sure why.

Despite all that, the initial nightmares she'd had of her last days in Europe had diminished in intensity. At some point, she realized that this had less to do with the events themselves than with having to tell Maureen anything. Once she'd told Maureen, no matter how Michelle told her, no matter how Maureen reacted, Michelle finally got it off her chest. How or when she was going to tell Maureen had fed into her nightmares.

She wondered if she should just forget what she'd experienced while travelling the world and just accept that somehow this was going to be her life; of choosing the wrong guy but having to bear his

children and suffer his idiocy, just because it was expected of her; of chasing her dreams locally but getting nowhere; of ageing prematurely while worrying that her children might become bad or pick up bad habits from God-knows-whom; or of having to accept the best of what was mediocre.

She wondered if it were simpler to repress all that she'd become and put it behind her.

Robespierre was eating his dry food contentedly. Robert was also contented, namely to be back home and sitting on the back patio, catching some sun, and this after having been cooped up in a hospital for a while. The sun felt good upon his face.

Robert heard the approach of a northbound train – *"Running empty"* – which was occasionally punctuated by riveting or hammering sounds from the garage.

"Genine is on the job."

He felt that she was on the job a little harder than normal. He figured to check on her progress but had that thought interrupted by Robespierre, all done eating, leash now in mouth, probably having mapped-out in his doggie brain what part of the road he was going to mark his territory on today.

"No, no, Robe-pee-ar; no walk today. I'm not up to it. Go shit in the yard."

Robespierre appeared disappointed.

Robert wished that Genine had brought Chump with her so the two dogs could at least play together.

Michelle opened the patio door. "Oh, I can walk him, Da. I've done it once already."

"Careful", said Robert. "I might get jealous of you."

Michelle laughed. "I don't think you have a jealous bone in your body." She kissed him on the forehead. He smiled. Now that there was no other family about, she got a good look at her father in the daylight. His recent coronary had taken something of a toll on his appearance. Michelle felt that he'd aged more than that but then remembered that she hadn't seen him in full daylight for five years. She realized that memories sometimes freeze-framed people in past tracks, made them immutable. She'd experienced this recently regarding her sisters' kids.

"How are you feeling, Da?" asked Michelle.

"A day at a time. No stress", said Robert, who was looking at the garage but then turned to Michelle, smiling. "Doctor's orders, see?"

Michelle smiled back then pursed her lips.

"You are worried about me, aren't you?" asked Robert.

"That's one way of putting it", said Michelle.

Robert nodded. "Well, I am worried about you."

Michelle looked at her father curiously. "Why's that?"

"Each of the other girls told me some things that happened to you in Europe."

Michelle felt anger coming on. She felt betrayed. She wasn't sure who she wanted to kill first.

"Not the whole story, mind. Just enough to know that it did not go well for you."

Michelle felt her anger subsiding. She still wanted to at least nail someone's head to a coffee table. "I wasn't sure how to say it to you."

"It was not your fault", said Robert, emphatically, trying to sound like a drill sergeant.

Michelle thought about this for a few seconds. "Well, you and M'ma always said it was our business to tell anyone or not."

"Right. Not that. No. I meant, it was not your fault", he said, more emphatically and measured this time, making sure every syllable was understood.

He told her how she could neither control nor predict everything; that it was impossible; and how could she know. He told her of when he was in the military: How other men used to talk about women who "had it coming to them" but knew shit; or how some men knew "what she wants" but didn't even ask her; or how some women were "sending signals", only they weren't.

"It is all fine to say that they were simply young and foolish men, but the whole story changes when it affects one of your daughters."

"It should change even if someone doesn't have a daughter yet", said Michelle.

"That. That is something all of us still have to work on."

He spoke of how he and his wife had raised Max to hold himself to a high standard and not make rash decisions, saying that it was better to wait than pay for having done something stupid later.

Robert stopped to take a deep breath. He exhaled. His breathing had been as measured as his words and syllables.

Michelle looked at her father fondly but concerned, wondering if talking about Max was necessarily good for him.

Robespierre figured he wasn't going anywhere any time soon and lay down on the patio, exhaling after that.

"I am proud of you all", he said.

"Honestly? I don't think I've done much to be proud of."

"You sell yourself short."

"All I've done is travelled and worked abroad. It's not like I stayed here and made a name for myself doing whatever."

"And do you think you would have been happy following in the path of everyone else?"

Michelle thought about it for a second and then let out a little laugh. He knew. "No."

"Do you think you are the only one who wanted to step out from the shadows made by older brothers and sisters and do what they were not doing?"

Michelle looked at her father with some surprise.

Robert smiled. "You know your mother's family history quite well, but it seems that you have forgotten mine. No worries there. I was the youngest of 10 children. Like you, I had a shadow to step out from. It was larger than yours, but it was a shadow all the same. I became an uncle when I was only six months old. But I never saw being the youngest as a bad thing. Just the opposite: I saw it as an opportunity to do what I wanted. No expectations, not like with my older brothers. Up until a point, my world was family, farm, village, and church, even though we have never been the most religious family."

Michelle smirked a little.

He continued: "My family was anti-conscription, but it was an opportunity for me to do something else, to go somewhere else, and to be someone more than I was at the time. I love both my families – the one I came from; the one I have now – but you cannot grow in the sun if you are always in the shadows of others."

Michelle smiled. He said what she'd always felt.

He continued. "I am proud of what I did, and I am proud of you, all of you. If your path leads you to having a family one day, then you will get there at some point. If not, no worry. In any case, be patient with yourself. Remember, I was 30 when I met your mother. Not everything happens on the schedule of another person."

Genine came up from the garage. "You can say that again", she said. "I have no idea what you were talking about, but that last bit about schedules?" Genine made a *snick* noise. "Yeah, I can get behind that."

"Speaking of schedules, how's the work in the belly of the big beast coming along?" asked Michelle.

"Coming along", said Genine, matter-of-factly. "Wanna see it, Da?"

"Yes, but when I can walk longer distances", he said, "which should be within a week."

"And that's what I wanted to talk to you about", said Genine. She told him about how Lee was going to finish her school year soon and how her husband had scheduled a week off for vacation. Robert understood and said that it was better for both of them to be rested up and then restart the project in a few weeks. In the meantime, Robert said that he'd ensure the garage was secured so that nothing could go wrong during that time. Michelle said she'd be around to keep an eye out as well.

Genine also reminded her father that Lauranne and Liam's graduation ceremony was coming up, but she wondered if he was up to going.

"In effect, I think I should be there if only to see my oldest grandchildren finish school", said Robert. He then joked, "Besides, Maureen would kill me if I did not."

The Walk

She needed to leave. She walked a half-click to Truman's Corners. She wanted to see if Vince was around. The old store/garage/gas station was still under renovation but scheduled to re-open soon, according to a sign outside. She wanted to see how things were coming along. It was already starting to look unappealing to her: all boxy and bigger looking; a little too clean and not enough grime; not like the old place. Chance would have it that Vince was around and looking a little less calm than normal.

"Vince?"

Vince looked at her strangely for two seconds before he had a glimmer of recognition. "Michelle! Long time!"

"Well, you're cleaner than normal today. I guess the garage hasn't re-opened yet."

"Nope. Next week. And just in time for summer."

"And I guess the rest will open, too?"

"Yep."

"And everything's well?"

"Having a problem trying to hire staff."

"What kind of problem?"

"Well, I've got most of the shifts filled for the store, except for one 8-hour, 2-day shift. I've got some kids from our old high-school on the payroll to work all the other shifts. But kids these days want a full-time job so they can buy cars or save up for college or something or other. They're not too wild about working weekends, 'specially evenings. Two days doesn't sound like much to them."

"Are you limited to hiring only teenagers? Or can anyone apply?"

"Oh, anyone can apply. In fact, I'll probably have to go through all this hiring rigmarole again in two months the nearer we get to school starting up again. But anyone who wants to apply has to go through the head office now. I get the final say on who works here. That was the agreement."

"That's good to know."

"Do you know anyone who needs a part-time job?"

Michelle hadn't gone too far along Truman Road – *"Or whatever the hell they call it now"* – before she came to the side-road on which Aidan's parents lived. She wondered what it would hurt to pass by their place, if only to say hello.

Aidan's father had taken over the family house two years before Aidan finished high-school, making some repairs and renovations but just enough to keep the house functional and standing. After Michelle's mother had died, Michelle noticed that the house had been completely renovated and a pool-house added in the back. Now, she noticed that some of its farmland had been sold off, judging by developments in the vicinity. She thought this made sense when she recalled that Aidan's father was more prone to backyard gardening than acreage farming.

She found it cute that she still somehow thought of Aidan, especially how long their relationship had lasted.

"Eight months. Not that long. I've been in longer. And it wasn't my first relationship either, so that doesn't track. Our lives weren't on the same track either. It would've never worked out. One of us would've been unhappy."

She put aside the notion of passing by Aidan's parents' place when she recalled that his father often had a hard time remembering people's names and anyway probably wouldn't recognize her after all this time.

She looked down at the roadside dirt and the back up again before noticing that they'd even given Aidan's old dead-end street a number. Other numbers then began to occur to her, notably those with dollar signs. Money was something she really didn't have a tonne of. She also had a credit card that would have to be paid off or down at some point. Aside from helping out Maureen at home and Genine in the garage, perhaps aside from revisiting more old, familiar places around the Vancouver area, aside from going to a grad reunion which was for one night only and was another three months away, she really had nothing else to occupy her time, except perhaps her dad and his health, and the house.

She thought a bit more about what Vince had said. Eileen had moved into the house with her two boys full-time, so Michelle knew that some evenings weren't going to be quiet. And a job a 10-minute walk from where she lived sounded great, never mind the kind of work. After travelling and working for

the past five years, she felt she was worn down enough and needed a breather. She wondered what it would be like to live here again, get more caught up with her family, and just let herself go with the turn with the Earth, living a comparatively quiet life for the next while.

"Vince?"

"Hey! Long time, no see! That was a fast appointment", said Vince, jokingly.

Michelle laughed a bit. "Do you think it's a good idea if I apply for that 2-day shift you were talking about?"

"Yeah, sure! I'd prefer someone I know at this point."

"Where do I sign?"

Seanna

"So? What's the deal?"

"Huh?" said Seanna, dozily, wondering dazedly from which direction that voice came.

"Well", said the voice, "you can't stay here all day. You've gotta go out at some point."

"Why would I want to do that, Holly?" asked Seanna.

"Well, let's see. You'll have to take that review you've been writing somewhere", said Holly.

"I'm not sure I was going anywhere with it in the first place."

"Haha, funny. But seriously, even if it is garbage, you'll have to take out and deliver it someplace.

After all, 'nothing stinks worse...' "

" '...than a pile of unpublished writing', yeah, I know."

"Besides, how else would you get your coffee money?"

"Herb tea. I can't touch caffeine anymore, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. But it's not like I'm around all the time, right?"

"Right. I think it'd be better if I reviewed it later."

"Yeah", said Holly, "later. Like, when you're not hopped up on meds?"

"Yeah. That. Later. No meds."

Seanna was zoning out again. She'd learned from experience that fighting it and trying to stay coherent wasn't really a good idea. Zone-outs came in long waves, generally receding after a few hours. Sleep often proved the best way to ride out those waves. In Seanna's estimation, it beat staring blankly at the walls by far.

This wasn't the kind of life she had imagined some years back. Then, she envisaged an older, slower version of the lives she'd had both in high school and after that; of fewer parties, less alcohol, fewer drugs; of more lovers, more satisfying sex; more writing. She'd dreamt she'd one day write a book or ten – all fiction – based on her experiences, her friends' lives, her lovers' lives, random things she'd seen on the streets, family folklore, and anything else her creative mind could conceive. And there was travelling. Definitely travelling. Back then, she felt she could do just about anything.

"So, why don't you do something?" asked Holly.

"Oh, leave me alone, please", said Seanna, starting to slur her words again.

"Retreat into sleep? Yeah, like always", said Holly.

"Bugger off."

Holly's voice went silent and Seanna drifted off to sleep.

"Too much light."

Her clock-radio, its alarm function rarely used, said "2:12". Her meds were wearing off and her synapses slowly firing up. A minute later, she thought like normal again and immediately set to editing her latest movie review, wondering as she went along what she had been thinking when she wrote this. Reviews of movies (generally art-house) and music (generally non-commercial) earned her extra money (not declared). She'd gone on welfare some time ago when her doctor determined that she could no longer work regularly or reliably. She'd been on a cocktail of meds for her condition for longer than that. Often, she couldn't even reckon what day it was without looking at the calendar, provided she remembered to change the month.

After she determined what she'd written and edited was mostly genius but inaccessible to anyone with an IQ of less than 100, she decided it was fresh-air time. She also decided that she just wanted to get out of her place for a while. Whenever she opened the windows in her large but mostly vacant apartment, it could never really be aired-out enough. There was always something of the past – her past – lingering and refusing to leave. She could never quite shake that feeling, and it was unhealthy. Besides, she had to take her review in at some point, at least before it became old news.

A while later, she fetched up at her usual café, review having been delivered and just in time, too. The editor suggested that she do a feature or a retrospective for her next assignment; something that

wasn't deadline sensitive but instead could be run at any time. Seanna asked if the pay was the same. It was. The editor gave her a bag with lots of CDs in it. Seanna smiled.

"Looks good. I think I can make something of this."

In the café, she ordered her usual pot of chamomile. The server – Kim was her name – said she hadn't seen Seanna in a while. Seanna wondered what the heck Kim was talking about.

"You haven't been here in over a month. Did you go on vacation?"

"A month?" asked Seanna, surprised at first but then quickly smiling and regaining her composure. "I've been busy. Writing takes time."

"Tell me about it", said Kim, nodding. She then leaned toward Seanna, lowered her voice, and subtly pointed to one corner of the café. "That guy over there? He says he's been working on a novel for 20 years now."

"So? If he needs 20 years, why not?"

"He also claims that someone planted a chip in his head."

"As long as it doesn't make his head explode and get all sorts of bodily matter and fluids in my tea, I don't see the problem here."

"He claims a dead friend keeps talking to him. Freaky, eh?"

Seanna stared at Kim, more irritated than before, trying to decide if there was a case for justifiable homicide.

"How much do I owe you?" asked Seanna. She sat down at a table as far out of earshot as possible from Kim. She liked Kim, but at times she felt like her own head was going to explode from listening too much to Kim's gossipy talk. Seanna had more sympathy for the Eventual Novelist (as she now called him) than she did Kim, whose biggest worry in life was not looking 'cool' or 'hip' or 'detached' enough.

"Poor Kim", thought Seanna, sarcastically. *"Life's so difficult when you have to put on airs and façades like she does."*

She poured herself a cup and started eyeing the CDs, one by one, that the editor had given her. She figured at first on simply BSing her way through some story, conceiving whatever she could from what she had in front of her. Sipping her chamomile and looking at the issue dates on the CDs, a pattern began to emerge, and she set about writing down notes for a possible article. Much of what she wrote down was based on spec; she had yet to listen to any of these CDs, to be remedied once she got home.

The Eventual Novelist's eyes flitted bird-like and his mouth opened and closed, like in voiceless conversation. She took care to glance at him occasionally, taking quick mental notes, without staring at him. She wasn't sure she was ready to engage in conversation with him should he notice her staring at him. Seanna wasn't in the mood.

Putting her note-taking aside for the moment, she poured another cup. In her mailbox, she'd found a letter from someone she'd gone to high school with. Seanna took the letter with her but didn't bother to open it immediately. The sender, "Shawna", to whom Seanna had not been terribly close to back then, was of low priority. Seanna made a point of staying in touch with people from high school to whom she had been close. But like most groups of people in life, they all just kind of drifted apart after a while. It was less of 'us' and more of each one wrapped up in his or her life.

She began to wonder what had happened to those she and her close friends used to call "losers." While they were in high-school, others felt too timid to call people like Seanna "losers" – "square pegs", sure – but Seanna and her friends didn't feel as charitable towards the majority. She thought these types were bound for a life sentence of corporate serfdom, not being able to think for themselves, just following the rules and the system, and graduating from high school into matrimony, mortgages, and parenthood with 2.3 children.

There were times when Seanna wondered whatever became of these people. She looked down at the envelope again and then decided to open it. It was a letter from the grad reunion committee, dated three weeks ago. Seanna began to wonder if she'd missed that one somewhere along the way or if she just hadn't bothered to check her mailbox for quite a while.

"Oh joy: 10th-anniversary grad reunion. Now I get to find out whatever happened to those season's losers of the year."

She put the letter down on the table, choosing to ignore it. After three seconds, she glanced at the letter and picked it up again, re-reading it and giving the event a bit more thought. She smiled little-wicked before putting it back in her bag.

The Eventual Novelist looked directly at her, bee-lined to her table, stopped stock-still, and said, "Whatever it is, don't be like me and put it off", before scurrying back to his table to do whatever he was doing before.

Seanna decided that it was time to drink up and go home.

Back at her place, Seanna looked at her clock-radio. It was nearly meds o'clock. The letter would wait. She needed to listen to her new CDs. Not long after, she took her meds.

"So, what'll you write this time?" asked Holly.

Seanna looked, eyes barely opened, to where she'd heard the voice. "I haven't decided yet."

"Well, don't put it off for too long."

"There's no real deadline on this piece. I can get in it whenever I want."

"Oh. What's this you're listening to?"

"I dunno", Seanna said, a little slurred. "Some CD the editor gave me to listen to. I'll take down names and numbers later."

"Y'know, you should join me sometime. It would be fun to do things together again."

"I'd love to. More than you know. But I like doing what I'm doing now."

"What? Zoning out? Surviving from one day to the next? Almost completely out of touch with your friends?"

"Tad and I still keep in touch. We saw each other only last week."

"I think you mean two months ago."

Seanna roused herself. "Two months?!? The hell?"

"Call him if you don't believe me."

"No, that's fine. No need. Why don't you lay off of me about my meds? I'm alive, aren't I?"

"Surviving. Remember that time that Aidan called and you hung up because you said 'I don't know anyone named Aidan'?"

"Yeah, but I called him back later."

"That was the first time I'd ever heard you apologize."

"I have my moments."

"And what about that letter? Are ya gonna go?"

"I'll think about it later. Could you possibly leave me alone in peace?"

"I'll try. But don't sit on that letter too long."

"Go away", Seanna mumbled, drifting off to sleep.

Seanna woke up again later. This time at 2:12 in the morning. She decided that listening to music was out of the question. Even if the volume were low, the neighbours would still complain. Listening in seclusion was out of the question: Her headphones had broken a while ago. Seanna was hungry but had to watch what she ate as well as how much. It was said that she once had a stomach of cast iron. She used to love her breakfasts of fried eggs on English muffins with melted cheese, as well as a glass of orange juice to wash it all down with. Now, her stomach often felt to her like a paper bag, and not a thick one either.

She looked once more at the letter from the grad reunion committee. She noted the time of the dinner and determined she'd be on her meds at that point. She didn't like the idea of zoning out among people she hadn't seen – in certain cases, didn't care to see – since her last year of high-school. Her friends would understand, she knew this full well, so there'd be no problem. But she didn't want her friends to have to cover for her all evening, making excuses and at the same time not having any fun. When she was in high school, people knew enough about her to love her as is, respect her, or steer clear of her. She wanted people to see her in a similar light this time. She wanted no one there to know that she had any problems.

Daylight again. Seanna's neighbours were just getting up and getting themselves together to head out to work. Seanna had work to do, too, and this before she had to take her meds again. She had CDs to listen to, an article to write, and, she decided, some friends to get back in touch with. Holly was half-right: Seanna had lost contact with many of her close friends. Not all, but enough.

But she was hesitant. Seanna had lost a number of close friends some years back. Her apartment used to house people she knew from high-school – their parents had kicked them out or disowned them. At its height, "the Commune" had seven people in it. Tad lived there while he was doing his degree in legal research. Wendy moved in with her then-baby boy Adam whom everyone treated as their own child, even those who never intended to have kids. Seanna's brother Kendall moved in later, as did one of his friends, Alex. The trouble started when Alex died from complications arising from HIV/AIDS. While Seanna was looking to see if anyone else wanted to move in, her brother went and OD'ed on smack. Wendy took over the search and met her future husband, Drew, in the process, and while it was decided that Drew was an ill fit for the Commune, Drew kept coming around to see Wendy anyway. They dated. She left with Adam and disappeared into the Okanagan. Then a close friend of Seanna's hanged herself, leaving Seanna emotionally devastated. Tad then decided to continue his studies while living elsewhere. Others had moved in and left according to their needs. But even though there were others, with her friends gone, this large place didn't quite feel emptier, unhealthy, somehow.

It was after the end of the Commune that Seanna started to experience health problems and wondered where the heck this had come from, and why. It was at the point that she got more and more tuned out with what was going on in her friends' lives. Michelle had stopped sending postcards from wherever she was in the world. Aidan had gone in search of a degree and true love. She hadn't heard from Wendy since she left the Commune. Tad still kept contact although less so since moving out to Bayline. Aside from the editor, as well as the odd type at the café, she really didn't have anyone left. Not even her family.

"So?"

"What?"

"So what? Hee hee, that's cute", said Holly.

"So are you", said Seanna.

"So, will you go?"

"To the grad reunion?" Seanna slurred a bit. It was meds time again. "Yessss. I'll go."

"But do you really want people to see you as you are now?"

"No."

"But you can't stop taking your meds. You'll die."

"Maybe I will. Maybe I won't. Maybe the Doc's lying. Maybe all this is a placebo."

"Placebo?"

"Yeah." Seanna took a deep breath and composed herself. "An inert pill which functions as a wonder-drug, as long as you're convinced it's effective."

"Oh. That. Okay. So you'll stop taking your meds?"

"I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll take them at different times. I'll think of something."

"I think it'll be good to see everyone again. I wish I could go."

Seanna's brows knitted. She was increasingly out of it. "But, why don't you go?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"Hmm?"

Holly smiled. "I'm dead."

Avant-Pendant-Après

Before

Owen was quite relieved that his flight had landed. Being a tall person, he and airplanes had always had a particular relationship: He particularly avoided travelling on planes unless he absolutely had to. The distance between Montreal and BC was long enough that he had to. Bus and train were also options, but the idea of being cooped up in a bus for three days and nights appealed to him less than travelling by airplane. Same with five days on a train that could be delayed though did have better legroom. Plane was quicker.

Lily was quite pleased to see him again. They had much to talk about before he went to his grad reunion. They had to get the issue of the house straightened out before too long. She was a little afraid that Owen might change his mind, maybe still harbouring anger towards his deceased uncle, and put her out on the street. She remembered Owen saying he wouldn't. Still, uncertainty abounded. She needed resolution.

They did talk during the drive from the airport, and Owen assured Lily she'd get a good deal out of things, but that they'd talk about it after he'd freshened up, gone for a long walk, had something to eat, and had a good night's sleep. Lily felt relieved. She also felt silly for thinking Owen could be mean.

Markie didn't bark at Owen the minute he entered the house. His doggie brain decided it was a good time to play dominance with the newcomer. Lily took Markie by the collar: "No!" Owen figured Markie would get used to him in time. Animals generally liked Owen.

"If Lyne's animals can get along with me, then so can Markie-barkie."

Owen popped a CD into his portable. On order: a revisit of his past life here. The path he used to take to high-school was now a legally-marked and maintained park trail. He wondered when this had happened. The trail's end downslope met a long road's dead-end. It led to Truman's Corners. Only two houses were along this stretch: They appeared mostly as he remembered them, at least from a passing glance. Even the biggest of the two, the Beauchamp house, seemed unchanged. Surrounding that, fields. Music caught the rest of his attention, much like it had 10 years prior.

After playing "death-dodge" while crossing the Valley Road – *"Will they ever install traffic lights here?"* – he wandered into a store attached to a gas station, not really paying attention to his surroundings.

"Yo Vince!" said Owen. "What's up?"

"Are ya looking for Vince?" said the young woman behind the counter, the music, something by I Mother Earth, low-volumed. "He's in the garage, around the side."

"Thanks."

"Quite the change, eh?"

"Change? Oh, yeah. It's... different, bigger. Has it been like this for long?"

"Re-opened in July, just in time for tourist season."

One eyebrow raised, Owen smirked. "You get tourists in Hatzquiam now?"

"Yeah, not really. People pass through here on their way up the Valley or beyond."

"So they come for the washrooms but leave with pop & chips, is that it?" said Owen, smiling.

"Pretty much. Sandwiches, too, sometimes. How long have you been away?"

"Seven years. Haven't lived here for 10."

She smiled. "Sounds like my future. I just finished high-school here. After I've saved up some money from this job, I'll be off like a shot. There's a bigger world out there. I wanna see it all!"

Owen smiled. "It's a pretty big continent we live on, forget the whole world."

She smiled at Owen. They made intros and shook hands.

"A pleasure", said Owen. "Ya say that Vince is in the garage?"

"Yep."

"Okay. Nice talking to ya, Mandy."

Mandy smiled as another customer pulled in.

Mechanic-at-work sounds came from the garage around the side. Owen leaned against the entrance of the garage – no one inside noticed him. A young woman was sitting on a chair to the side. She hadn't noticed Owen yet. She had long, dirty-blond hair tied into a simple pony-tail. She was wearing runners, jeans, and a grey hoodie, the Hatzquiam High-School logo on its right arm. Owen made out the word "Rugby" on the hoodie's back. Right leg crossed over left and hands wrapped around the top knee, she had the look of someone who preferred to be somewhere else, doing something else. Owen couldn't be sure.

"So?" she started, "how do things look?"

"Well, good thing you brought this in for a check-up", said Vince. "There were a few minor problems, but I found them soon enough. Now, if you'd left them til later,..."

"...then I'd be sitting in the middle of the T-Can, wondering why my car decided to take up smoking."

"Or worse. Gotta be careful with used cars. They say 'Works fine', but you never know."

Owen spoke up: "Ah. There's nothing like a used car to deal with other people's problems."

The young woman turned and smiled at Owen.

Vince squinted, almost sneered, from under the chassis but then smiled. "Well, well. Look what the cat coughed up. And short a guitar to boot."

"I heard everyone missed me, so I came back", said Owen.

"You're so full of it, Owen", said Vince, joking. "You're back for the grad reunion like everyone else."

"Yeh, that, too."

The young woman laughed.

"So you here to jaw or here to help?" asked Vince.

"Help? You know me, man. I'm a wiz with a clutch but a klutz with a wrench."

Vince laughed.

"Seriously? I figured I'd stop by and say hi."

Vince tightened a nut. "Just wandering around?"

"Yeh. I thought I'd see what hasn't changed and what has, like this place here."

"Goin' by the old high-school?"

"Yeh, sure. Why not?"

"It's still there, but they've added a bunch of stuff onto it. I don't know what's where. Lauranne here just graduated from Hatz High, so she's more in the know. Me? I just fix cars."

"Y'useta talk about workin' on trucks and trains one day. I guess not, eh?"

Vince just shrugged.

"My auntie and my grandpa work on those things", said Lauranne.

"They're the heavy mechanics in these parts", said Vince. "I just bolt and unbolt stuff."

"So I've noticed", said Owen, smiling at Lauranne. "Well, Vince, I'll probably swing by here on the way home and say hi again. Now you've got me all curious about Hatz High. Gotta see that."

Owen walked along what used to be Truman Road but had since been given a number, one that he wasn't going to bother to memorize: He didn't intend to be here for all that long. For the next few weeks, he wanted to relax, go to the grad reunion, get things straightened out with Lily, see some sights, and go back to the priority of life and studies in Montreal. Walking along and contented with having seen a familiar face, it dawned on him that he'd forgotten about the two years of fun he'd had here.

The area in back of his old school had since been developed into a housing subdivision. He'd hoped to shortcut the walk to school but now wondered if there was some way to get from A to B.

"*Like a mouse in a bloody maze*", thought Owen, feeling a little resigned, deciding to follow any set of streets that didn't say "*cul-de-sac*" and went southeasterly. Though that did the trick, Owen didn't recognize the rear of his old high-school. Vince was right: They'd put a bunch of other stuff in.

He wended his way past track and field towards a building he didn't recognize but whose sounds spoke mechanic's shop – he wondered if the foul-mouthed mechanics teacher was still there. He also wondered if the music department had moved. He rounded the westernmost building and then went straight into where some teachers used to park their cars. This time, no cars, no gravel; all greened over. He hoped the music building was still in the same place.

A young woman played guitar and sang – "Wayfaring Stranger", by Owen's reckoning. It sounded like he was headed in the right direction. She was holding court with a small gang, who sometimes contributed to the harmonies in the chorus. Owen stopped and listened for a bit, noticing how well she played guitar and how powerful her voice was for someone seemingly so young. A part of him felt like singing along but figured it better to leave the younger generation make its own music.

Guitar Gal stopped at the end of one verse when she saw Owen. "Someone looks the wayfaring stranger. Lost?"

"Nah", said Owen, "I know where I am. Kind of. I just came back to look around. I haven't been here for 10 years now."

"I've still got three years to go before I'm free as a bird", she said.

"Ooh", said one of her friends, "you should play that."

"Before you go all Lynyrd Skynyrd", said Owen, "could ya tell me if the music teacher's in?"

"Which one? There're two", she said.

"Two?" Owen let out a deep breath, eyes wide. "Well, now. That's different."

"One of them should be in", she said, sympathetically.

"Thanks", said Owen.

She nodded and smiled as she attempted *Free Bird*.

Students inside played bits of things on the piano and other instruments. Other students ate lunch. Some studied. The practice hall was large enough that a small group could play quietly and not disturb the others. Owen saw a teacher sitting in the office, looking like he was adjusting a click-track machine. The teacher noticed Owen out of the corner of his eye. Without looking up, he asked, "Can I help you?"

Owen recognized the teacher and then smiled wryly. "Yeah, I'm looking for a guy named Scott. Played bass clarinet in concert band about 10 years ago? Really sucked at it, too, if memory serves."

The teacher gave Owen an oh-come-on look but then laughed afterward. "I think your memory is bad. I was... okay. But you know what they say about those who can't."

"And here you are."

"So, Owen, what's brought you back to our old haunt?"

"Oh, just back in town for the reunion. I thought I'd stop by here and see what's what. I figured I'd wander around Hatzquiam to see how many people remember my real name."

"And?"

"Two so far, but the day is young."

"Who's the other?"

"Vince up at Truman's."

"He doesn't count. He never forgets a name. So? Still doing music?"

"Yeh, a bit at university. Still playing guitar and singing. But I went for a degree in literature rather than music."

"Why not music?"

"Two words: music theory. Sucked the joy right out. I just wanted to play and sing."

Scott looked at Owen sincerely. "Heh. I've got a student who loves to play and sing but gets bored stiff with basic theory. I told her she should go into the talent contest but she says she'd rather play for small audiences."

"It's possible I met her outside a few minutes back", said Owen, thumbing towards the outer door.

Scott got up, looked outside his office towards the outer door, and craned his neck back and forth to get a better view. "Yep. That's the one. Lee Martin. What a shame."

"Maybe start her off with small audiences and have her work her way up?" offered Owen. "She'll do it when she wants, I'm sure. I remember how daunting it was singing in front of everyone on stage in the high-school musical."

"You? I thought nothing phased you?"

"Eh, don't be so sure about that."

"Did you ever freeze? I don't recall. Then again, I couldn't see much from the orchestra pit."

"I came close once."

"What happened? How did you avoid it?"

"I just imagined the audience in their underwear."

"Does that work?"

"It worked for me."

"Hmm. Yeah."

"So?" asked Owen. "Will you be at the reunion?"

"Yes! I'm looking forward to it, too. I figured originally, 'Why bother?', but Paula said 'Why not? It should be fun'. And I can't refuse her", said Scott, smiling.

Owen smiled. "Ah, so things worked out between you and Paula? I can remember when you were afraid of asking her out."

"Yeah. And you goaded me into it."

"And then you were afraid that nothing would come of your relationship."

"Seanna pestered me about that and told me to grow a backbone, or else she'd steal Paula from me."

"Seanna, eh? So that's what happened", said Owen, wincing and trailing off. "So, kids?"

"Two. One girl, one boy. And what about you? Someone special?"

"Well, I'm between girlfriends right now. The next one will be the one. I can feel it." Owen felt like what he'd said was such a put-on, as if he had to justify being single and childless around others he'd gone to school with.

"Well, good luck with it. Look, I have to get back to work. But we'll talk at the reunion, okay?"

"Fer sher, man."

Scott saw Owen to the outer door, where Owen told him, "Think about what I said, right?", nudging his head in Lee's direction. She was about to finish another song.

"Will do. See ya, Owen."

"And you", said Owen pointing to Lee, "Keep on playing. Never give up, no matter how difficult things get. Peace." Owen waved good-bye and wandered off in the direction of downtown. Before putting his headphones on anew, he could hear Lee picking strings on a tune he'd never heard before. He liked the melody and as he walked away he smiled. He heard her words: *"I do what I do, just 'cause I can."* To him, it sounded like how he lived his life.

Wendy loaded up her little hatchback – nickname: "Lil" – with enough things for a week. In truth, this didn't amount to a lot: a supply of clothes, some of her own laundry needs, two packed lunches, and some photos of her own family. She also brought a few gifts of gratitude for her cousin Caro and her family for letting Wendy stay with them for the duration. Caro's visit to Wendy's place last year had been good for family relations. Wendy and Caro had never been the closest of cousins, and their years apart had made them almost strangers to one another. That changed last year. Wendy figured things had changed before that, but that it took meeting up to confirm that. Both of them had become parents since high-school, and parents usually had lots to talk about.

If there was one thing that Wendy didn't look forward to, it was the possibility of running into her parents. She hadn't factored parental time into her schedule at all, and she was in no rush to change her plans either. She had so many other people to visit, mainly friends from high-school. She'd been out of their loops for too long and saw the grad reunion as a good place to start reconnecting.

She was sure to run into the guy who got her pregnant in high-school. She was also sure she had something to say to him, and that she wouldn't let him off the hook until she'd completely spoken her mind. She was ready for a fight. She had been for a few years now.

Aidan and Talia were late in taking their honeymoon, but they felt that the timing was good. There was time for Aidan's grad reunion, as well as John's birthday the Wednesday following. Before and after all this, they could do other things.

They had two nights on Saltspring Island before heading to the Lower Mainland. They opted for an indirect approach, choosing to take the same ferry they'd come on back to Vancouver Island, and taking a seasonal ferry in its last week of operation to neighbouring North Pender Island, where they lunched on a familiar-to-Aidan clifftop overlooking the ferry terminal at Otter Bay. He'd thought of making love to her then and there but decided not to repeat history. They then took the outer Gulf

Islands ferry to Galiano Island and from there back to Tsawwassen. The whole affair took the better part of a day, but they had fun along the way.

By the time they arrived at John and Julia's, only Julia was there, wondering why they were six hours later than scheduled. They smiled at each other for a few seconds before Talia responded that they'd taken much longer than expected and that they were tired. Aidan said to Julia that they'd talk about it in the morning. They never did.

Tad was preparing his notes for a mock-case study when he received a phone call from one of the organizers of the grad reunion. She wanted him to arrive earlier to help set up some things.

He welcomed this sort of phone call. Meeting up with Michelle a little while ago helped put him into the mood to volunteer for this. He knew that this mood wouldn't last long after the reunion, so he figured to ride this great feeling til the wave subsided.

Thoughts of this reunion also helped Tad escape a part of his recent past which came back to spook the hell out of him. One of Tad's former culture-jammer buddies told him that two members got arrested by the cops and another got beaten within an inch of his life by a bunch of unreconstructed neo-Nazis. Said buddy also told Tad about Wyatt, and that one of Wyatt's automatons was looking for Tad. When Tad asked what had happened to Wyatt, he was told that Wyatt went looking for more money to continue his crusade against a perceived ever-increasing number of enemies and didn't quite get what he wanted. Tad's comrade didn't know much more than that but Tad speculated that Wyatt had run afoul of the wrong crowd, pulling an over-privileged hissy fit when he didn't get his way.

A Wyatt-toady had spotted Tad during his meet-up with Michelle in Kitsilano and somehow tracked him down.

"Get private number."

She insisted Tad get on board with a new collective she was forming to continue Wyatt's work, saying all would be forgiven if Tad joined. Tad listened, feigning naïveté, and then asked, before declining her, why Wyatt was no longer head of the collective. Her response: "Need-to-know" – she figured Tad didn't, apparently. Tad told her that what she didn't say told him volumes and most likely confirmed what was spec about Wyatt. She went on a verbal rampage, telling Tad he was no longer in her under-30 target group, despite him being 28. Tad suggested the remaining collective members legally change their names so they could avoid whatever happened to Wyatt, who was probably quite dead, if rumours were true. She then went Krakatoa, calling Tad a privileged male. Tad laughed at this and reminded her that he'd been one of two non-whites in Wyatt's group, so she should shove her own privilege somewhere.

Tad thought it ironic-bordering-on-insane that no matter how open and democratic things become they somehow come under the control of a certain demographic, one which had grown up with an idea of automatic moral superiority, telling everyone else how to act, how to be, what to say, what to think, or so Tad figured. It didn't matter if it was the "Wy-lites" or the Family Compact or the Château Clique or any opaque order or sect. Tad figured he could agree with the politics of Wyatt's lackey while still disagreeing with her methods and attitude. But he began to wonder about her politics. She'd stated what those were but it sounded less like what Tad believed in, what the collective had been about, and more about wild conspiracy-oriented stuff.

"Lies begetting lies compounded by more lies. Bad times ahead, as someone once said."

After hearing her out, she convinced Tad of one thing: that this new collective would be worse than the old one.

He put all this behind him. He had to. The grad reunion committee asked him to write something about a friend and put it together with a few photos. To Tad, this was personal and, at least for now, more important than anything political.

Seanna took one look at her pills, regarding each like someone she'd known for a long time but wasn't sorry to see go. She'd already set aside her dose for the evening. Although she'd done this for years and figured herself a pro at it, she decided all the same not to take any chances. Once she was sure of things, she opened each bottle and slowly let its contents slide into the garbage.

"One by one you go, one after the other, lemmings off a cliff."

She suddenly recalled that this was only a popular myth about lemmings.

"Well, now who's the real loser?"

She emptied one bottle after another – her memories of Saturday-night benders of yore – knowing what she was doing was probably bad for the environment: These pills were going to end up in a land-fill and probably poison half the seagull population that scavenged there. At this point, she didn't really care. She was saying goodbye to the only other constant occupant in her apartment.

Well, not really the only other. She had one more thing to deal with. She poured herself a glass of water and then took her pills, waiting for the predictable side-effects to take hold. She intended to have a long conversation with someone.

During

"Someone's smiling at me", said Michelle.

"And well they should. You have beautiful eyes", said Seanna.

"Really?" Michelle smiled widely. "Thanks! But seriously?"

"Okay, which one?"

"The woman coming over here."

"Michelle."

"Yeah?"

"No, that's her name."

"Oh. Her. Yeah. How could I forget? Duh. That should've been easy enough for me to remember."

"Let me get this straight", said Vince, "You stick it to the Man while working for the Man?"

"Well...", Tad started to say.

"That's just fucked up", said Scott. "I'm surprised you haven't been busted yet."

"Yeah", said Dawn, "Me, too. How do you do it?"

"Well", said Tad, "I work for a law firm, sure, but I'm not screwing them over. I think you guys are lumping in too much here. All I said was I culture-jam on the side."

"So, as long as you keep your work and play separate, everything's okay", said Dawn.

"That's the size of it", said Tad.

"Still not convinced", said Scott, laughing.

"Holly committed suicide?" asked Shawna, surprised. "When did this happen?"

"About three years after grad", said Seanna.

"Oh my."

"And now the prize for the grad living the farthest away from HSS", said Allan, one of the organizers of the grad reunion. "Hold on. Could Ken Edmonds and Owen Powell come up here please?"

He turned off the mic and spoke to the two of them: "Okay, where are Côte-des-Neiges and Lachine in Quebec?"

Owen responded first: "CDN is mid-island of Montreal, while Lachine is farther to the west."

"Yeah, that's essentially it", said Ken.

"Okay, we're good then", said Allan, turning the mic back on. "And the grad the farthest away from Hatzquiam High is... Owen Powell!"

"That could've been me winning that bottle of wine", thought Michelle, "if I hadn't moved back. Who's that who won, though?"

"Seanna?" said Wendy.

"Yes, dear?" answered Seanna.

"That's the guy who got me pregnant. I'm sure of it."

"No, that guy knocked up Holly and then vanished without a word", said Seanna, teeth clenched on the sight of him. "He's not Adam's father."

"What? You've known the whole time?", said Wendy, looking a little miffed at Seanna. "Did you think to tell me back then?"

Seanna looked at Wendy: "What would it have changed?"

Wendy got a little angry at Seanna, wondering: *"Who is she to say what I need to know?"*

Seanna was unmoved by the vibes she was getting from Wendy.

"Well, now I'm curious", said Wendy, calmer. "Where is he?"

"Who?" asked Seanna, feigning ignorance.

"Adam's father."

"There", she said, pointing. "Let me show you."

Wendy became nervous and astonished all at once.

"Hey, Mish."

"Hey, Aidan. How's life treating you?"

"Pretty good." He smiled.

She looked down at his left hand and the shiny object on it.

"Yeah, I got married", Aidan said rather modestly.

Michelle feigned surprise. "Someone I know?"

"Gail's sister, Talia."

"Is Talia anything like Gail?"

"A bit. Not really."

Michelle smiled. "You seem happy."

Aidan smiled, erasing the need for words.

Michelle smiled, too, recalling no need for words but still feeling a bit ill at ease.

"Look at those two", said Tad.

"They look awkward around each other", said Gail, smirking, then taking a haul on her cigarette.

"Yeah, kinda."

"Do you think they were like that when they started dating?"

"Dunno. I wasn't around for 'that magic moment', though I did have my own with her."

"You? When was that?"

"Er, grade 7."

"Pfft, young love", Gail said, scoffing somewhat. "How adorable."

"Mish & I have been friends ever since."

"I've never understood people like that."

"Like what?"

"Exes who stay friends."

"It happens, and more often than you'd think."

"Yeah, I suppose it does. Maybe it shouldn't be happening to him."

"Hey, if your sister's cool with it, then I don't see the problem."

"Talia doesn't always know what's good for her."

"Is that an objective opinion, or are you just playing over-protective big sister?"

Gail scoffed. "Ten years later and you're still a jerk", she said, flicking her cigarette butt and walking away.

"I'll never figure out what Aidan saw in her", thought Tad.

"Hey, Michelle." started Gail.

"Oh hi, Gail. Long time", said Michelle, washing her hands in the bathroom sink.

"So tell me: How is it that two people who haven't seen each other in almost 10 years act like they've been friends the whole time?"

"Maybe two people still act that way because they haven't seen each other every day for the past 10 years", quipped Michelle, knitting her eyebrows. "I dunno."

"Another question: Why do exes stay friends?"

Michelle shrugged her shoulders. "Dunno. Maybe they were better off as friends than lovers. If you have a point, would you care to take me to it?"

"Just making sure my brother-in-law stays my brother-in-law."

"What, Aidan? Oh, you have got to be shitting me. Look, I had my time with him. I wanted to do a lot of things in life, but it didn't include staying around here. He thought otherwise. I couldn't bloody well clone myself and be in two places at once, now could I? So I gave up being with him. I didn't want to live his or anyone else's life, just my own."

Gail was without words.

Michelle softened her expression and continued: "Look, he told me he saw your sister again for the first time in years, and they just clicked. He's romantically happy for the first time since I don't recall when. He told me she's perfect for him. I'm happy for him. Really. Most couples stay together for a few years before deciding to get married. But somehow, in their hearts, they just knew to dive in almost right away. That's not what I do normally – well, maybe once – but it seems to be working for them, and that's fine. In any case, this is a reunion, and people do meet again and catch up and go over old times together."

Gail looked at the bathroom light before turning back to Michelle. "You know, I was a bit mean to Aidan back in school."

Michelle wanted to say "a bit?" but instead continued to listen.

"Maybe I was looking for the wrong type of guy back then – I didn't think Aidan really fit the bill. He was cute, smart, athletic, nice. And he listened." Gail looked down and gave a little smile before looking back up again. "He still listens. That's probably his best quality, really. He listens and doesn't judge."

"I don't see a problem here", said Michelle, much calmer now.

"Maybe that's why I was so mean to him. It wasn't cool for me to like a guy like that."

"That can't even be classified as 'attracting by appearing to repel'. Seriously, I thought we all outgrew that shit by grade 11."

"Yeah, well,...", said Gail, still trying to play the schoolyard tough but feeling a little wounded inside.

"It'll pass", said Michelle. "But if you'd like to know about stupid, I can tell you about some of my first-class eff-ups."

Gail let out a little smile. "Alright, but I think we should get a bottle of wine for that."

"Wine? I don't see a problem with that", said Michelle, laughing a little.

"Hey, Aidan", said Tad. "I think your sister-in-law is on the warpath about Michelle."

"You mean that sister-in-law over there? Talking to Michelle?" asked Aidan, pointing.

"Well, well, well. It looks like they've found fun."

"I'm sure Michelle set her straight. Talia had to do that once, too."

"You've married into an interesting family, my friend", said Tad. "Who's that sitting with them? Dawn? And Peter?"

"Heh! Well, how about that. It is them. They've been together since she was in Grade Nine."

"Broken-Arm Boy?" chimed in Seanna, slowly sauntering outside for some air.

"Yeah, him", said Tad. "I don't recall his story."

"His arm was in a cast when he started Grade Eight at Hatz High", said Seanna. "Nobody bothered to ask his real name at the time. After the cast came off, it was Peter or Pete or Petey more and more, but 'Broken-Arm Boy' still stuck with him throughout high-school."

"I remember Talia's older sister, Liane, saying that he broke the other arm two months before his grad", said Aidan. "I guess there's symmetry in the universe."

"Heh", said Seanna, "more like dumb luck. So, Tad here told me about your marriage. Congrats. You finally hit pay-dirt."

"Yeah, it took me nine years to do it, but better to wait for the right person."

"I don't believe in marriage", said Seanna. "Just whatever works for me at the time."

"Whatever works for you. Those two there", said Tad, pointing to Peter and Dawn, "have been inseparable since they first met."

"Yeah, I remember pushing them into it", said Seanna.

"Heh! I remember that", said Tad.

"And there wasn't much to it", said Seanna. "Dawn & I hung out together for most of Grade Nine. Not sure why. Maybe a good idea at the time? She fell for him at first sight. She talked about him constantly but did nothing about it. So, I pestered her about it then I made a bet with her that she'd do nothing about it at all."

"How much did you lose?" asked Tad.

"Five bucks", said Seanna. She smiled. "It was worth it."

"Now I feel like ruining their fun", said Tad

"You're a bastard", said Seanna, eyebrows knitted.

"I'm sure that's not the worst he's ever heard", said Aidan.

"Not tonight, and not by a long shot", said Tad, looking at Aidan. "Shall we?"

"Yes. Let's."

Seanna joked and pointed her thumb at the parking lot. "I'll be in the car."

Along the way, Aidan asked Tad, "Say, have you seen Robbie Simpson around? I thought for sure he'd be here."

Tad gave Aidan a resigned look. "Before we go spoil Mish & Gail's party, I'm gonna have to spoil yours, alas."

The conversation between Wendy and Owen was awkward at best. After Seanna revealed who Adam's real father was, Wendy felt a little embarrassed. She still had this pent-up anger and had been ready for a show-down. She'd wanted to confront Owen, but now the reason had disappeared. When Owen learned that Wendy had had a kid, he wasn't sure whose it was. Neither one knew what the other knew, making the conversation all the more awkward.

Wendy talked about her life, living in the Commune for a bit before meeting a guy, marrying him, and then moving up to the Okanagan with him.

Owen talked about his travels, his various jobs, going back to school, and making a life in Montreal.

To Owen, Wendy's life was the proverbial life-sentence. He'd become a rover, resigned to a lack of permanence in his life. There was still too much out there for him to see. In love, until recently, he'd never been serious enough with anyone to even consider settling down. Also, there were words Wendy used that Owen didn't fully comprehend. He didn't live in her little world.

To Wendy, the world Owen travelled through was vast, strange, curious. She did not fully understand what he was talking about, catching maybe seven out of ten words and stopping on occasion to try and comprehend other words. By the time she was able to understand, he had already gone on to another portion of his life. Wendy wasn't stupid, and she was always curious, but many of his points of reference were lost on her.

To each other, they may as well have been talking different languages.

Owen later passed by a table that he referred to as the Row of the Real-gone.

The school counsellor who used to direct musicals at Hatz High, liked by lots of people? Gone.

The Math teacher who made algebra entertaining? Cancer.

The English teacher who everyone liked, the one who had prior experience as a stage actor, and it showed in the way he taught class? Exeunt. Permanently.

There were two others, both students, whom he knew. His heart felt ready to drop into his stomach.

He went outside for some air but ran into Seanna. She decided that it was a good time to confront Owen. She gave him a dressing down, telling him what had happened to Holly, one of the dead at the memorial table. It wasn't pretty.

Owen was relieved on one level. He finally learned that he wasn't the father of Wendy's kid but was mortified to learn about Holly's fate post-grad.

"Even if I'd known, what would it have changed? Look at who I was, at who I am. I would've gone out into the world all the same, leaving Holly behind to fend for herself. No, it would've changed nothing."

He'd never thought anyone was serious about him, so why should he be serious about them? That is, until he met Carina, someone he fell in love with, for real, who to him was more than just a lay, a passing fancy, or a girlfriend-de-la-session. More particularly, Carina had been someone for whom he was willing to put aside his ways. Seanna's words, a bucket of water on his face, left him cold. He wasn't sure what to do about anything. Self-doubts.

Owen started to wonder what he was doing here. He'd been a late-comer to Hatzquiam and a year older than every other student in the same grade as him. He'd just avoided going to a new high-school only a few streets from his house. The local school board wasn't sure if the new school could be fully operational in time for the school year and so limited enrolment for its first year. Hatzquiam High was fully operational, so he went there.

"Could've been different."

Or not. He had a tendency to gravitate in and out of this group and that part of any school he went to, not really trying to fit in but not really avoiding anyone either. Most people couldn't really remember his name, and he felt this wouldn't have changed had he gone to that other school. Most of the time at Hatz High, he was known as "Guitar Guy." In classes, whenever the teacher mentioned his real name or acknowledged him that way, many people turned around and wondered who the teacher was talking to. Nobody knew who Owen was.

This didn't bother him so much; he rather preferred a certain degree of anonymity, and he wore the pseudonym well anyway. He remembered everyone's names and people loved that, like a rock-star on stage pointing to people in the audience.

Ten years later, he was still Guitar Guy on sight, but next to no one could remember him by looking at his name tag. His guitar was far away. Alone outside, he felt all of a sudden quite exposed.

Gail got up to look at the memorial table. Michelle followed her, saying that maybe it wasn't a good idea, considering how much alcohol they'd consumed.

It was depressing for both of them.

"So that's why Seanna was so cryptic about Holly", said Michelle.

"Robbie Simpson?" said Gail, stunned, feeling like someone had just smacked her across the head with a hairbrush. "I think I need some air."

"Yeah, you do that. I have to go find someone."

"Hey, Vince", said Michelle. "I need to talk to you."

"Sure."

Gail staggered outside and got startled when she saw Owen, still smarting from Seanna's dressing down. "Jesus Christ, Owen!"

"Aw, you sound like my mam when I was a kid."

"Ha-ha. I thought I was talking about the last time you were on stage. Hey, got a ciggie?"

"Nah", said Owen, "I gave those up a few years ago."

"Oh? Okay, good. Did you see the memorial table?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. Two of us gone already."

"Yeah, but Robbie Simpson? I thought he'd outlive us all."

"Pretty sucky, I know. I don't think there was a single person in high school who didn't like him."

Gail went eerily quiet. "Fuckin' depressing. I mean, he loved that motorcycle of his."

"And in the end, it killed him."

"And Holly Graham. Poor her."

Owen went cold.

"Hung herself", said Gail, shaking her head. "I know she was always up and down back in school..."

Owen couldn't think of anything to say.

"...but I never thought she'd do that."

Owen shrugged his shoulders. "Life throws the darnedest surprises sometimes", he said, feeling resigned.

Gail looked at Owen strangely.

Owen smiled. "I'm fine, Gail. Yeah, it's sad."

Gail smiled. "Y'know, I'm amazed that you always manage to remember people's names."

"Hey, you remembered mine."

"Too easy."

"The only person better than me is Seanna."

"Oh, that bitch."

Owen said nothing. The less his spoken words circulated, the better – less blow-back that way. One confrontation in one night with the same person was enough. "I'm sure that 'bitch' has a lot on her mind these days. But enough about her."

"Yeah, I'm sure enough people got enough of her back in the day."

Owen looked at her strangely. "*Mean gossip*", he thought. "*Gail hasn't changed one bit.*"

Just then, Aidan came outside, looking for Gail.

"There you are. Michelle wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Sure", said Gail. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Not sure. Mish's words, not mine. In any case, Michelle wants to get another bottle, if you're in for it."

"If I drink too much, I'll probably be in for it."

Owen smiled, stifling a laugh.

"What?" asked Aidan, confused.

"Never mind", said Gail, leaving.

Aidan looked at Owen. "Hey Owen!"

"Hey Aidan."

Aidan and Owen talked about how things had gone since grad for each of them. Aidan showed Owen his wedding ring. Owen mentioned that he'd been in a serious relationship up until last April. Aidan gave Owen a certain look and told him he hoped Owen had really and truly moved on. Owen got a feeling deep down that Aidan was onto something.

"So! It's been a while! I almost didn't recognize you without your guitar", said Aidan, smiling, breaking up the gloom.

Owen smiled. "Heh heh. Ye're a clown, McGregor."

They all laughed. Owen was content that he wasn't completely forgotten.

The reunion let out at 10pm. Pretty early by some standards, but many people had families to go home to, and for them, the days of partying til dawn were thoroughly over.

For those who did not yet have families, it was another matter altogether.

Wendy was the designated driver going back to Michelle's place – she hadn't touched a drop of alcohol all night. Michelle had decided they'd continue the party there. When they arrived, it looked like there was no one around. It was strange: Michelle couldn't quite recall why there was no one in the house. Just to be sure, she looked through the house quickly, hoping no one was sleeping. Nope. Only the cat.

"All clear!" exclaimed Michelle.

Under clear night-sky, Owen looked out on the silhouetted valley. All the development around Hatzquiam since Owen left high-school wasn't quite within his view. There were fewer tall trees around compared to before, but he still liked the view. Back then, whenever he had trouble sleeping, he used to go out onto the house's back patio, light up a cigarette, and immerse himself in night-time's tranquillity. Now was no different, except that he'd given up the cancer sticks not long after grad. He'd been away from all this for far too long. Montreal could be quiet at nights, the distant din of night traffic aside. But it was never as quiet as this. Owen needed this kind of quiet right now.

Confusion. He wondered whether things really could've been different back then. Could he have changed whatever his mindset was back then and assumed responsibility for what happened? Maybe Holly would still be alive to this day. Maybe the two of them would've lived together, eventually getting married and raising their kid as best they could. Or maybe it all would've ended in separation or

divorce. Maybe he would've gotten frustrated with domestic life and one day just upped and left, no bye, no note.

"How could Seanna say that the kid was mine?" Owen asked himself, angry with himself and everyone else involved in this whole affair. *"Did they do a blood test on the foetus? No, there's no way that was my kid. It must've been someone else. That must be it. It was someone else."*

He looked up at the stars – bright, like he remembered them from a decade ago – perhaps searching for a sign. In the stillness, he shook his head. He knew he got Holly pregnant. He knew it was him.

"It tracks. I should stop being so bloody effing passive-aggressive about this. Seanna was right. She knows, she sees, she remembers. What in the universe have I been doing with my life?"

He hung his head low for some minutes – he was too ashamed to even look at the stars. He never thought he would experience either of these in his life: Remorse and regret.

"What the hell am I supposed to do now?" he muttered as he looked out on the valley once more.

Remorse and regret turned to curiosity as he looked out on the valley again and wondered how many families from his high-school days still lived where they used to. Most of those houses were blacked out, save for the odd outside light on for security purposes. On the road below, which dead-ended at the base of the hill, and where Lily occasionally walked her dog Markie, one house had its inside lights on.

"There's the Beauchamp house, except that the silhouette of the barn out back looks all wrong, like it's been replaced by something else."

It was the first time since he'd come back that he noticed anything different about that particular house. He used to walk by it going to school – it stood out among the surrounding fields – but it occurred to him at this point that he'd never met anyone who lived in that house, though he was quite sure someone lived there.

"I get the impression those lights don't turn on and off by themselves."

Seeing lights-on on a Saturday night reminded him of the occasional house party he used to get invited to around here. He recalled one special party: the cast party for the annual high-school musical production. In his last year, it was "Jesus Christ Superstar", with him in the lead role. At first, it surprised everyone who auditioned, thinking that he was there to audition for the orchestra. Many of them didn't know that Owen could put Tom Jones to shame in singing. Oddly enough, the whole time the musical was being put together and then performed was when people called him by his real name. This included Holly, who had a minor part as a Soul Girl.

"That's where it all started. Where was that cast party again? Some house just above Inneston. One with an indoor swimming pool and a big rec-room. The Cooper house? Sounds about right."

He remembered that Aidan had been in that musical, too. That's how Aidan remembered Owen's real name. Aidan had played Pontius Pilate. Owen remembered how much Aidan had thrown himself into the role and was quite good at it – too good, in fact – but heard that Aidan was trying at that point to avoid anything other than studies and his part in the musical, owing to a bad romantic moment. Owen also learned that Gail had been attracted to Owen but he hadn't really been interested in her, finding her kind of repulsive.

"That's just fucked up. On the other hand, maybe if I'd gone out with Gail then I wouldn't've gotten Holly pregnant."

Too many regrets, too many what-ifs, all at once. Owen wanted to cry but couldn't. He wanted to yell out in pain but couldn't. He who had been vocal about things and liked to sing whenever he wanted could not even speak, could not even manage a note. He wished a meteor would fall out of the sky and land on him. He let out a deep sigh. He'd have to be content with making only that noise for now.

Aidan looked oddly at the stereo. "What are we listening to?"

"A comp tape I made in high-school", said Michelle. "Found it a few days ago. I haven't heard this since forever."

"What's this song?" asked Aidan.

"I don't remember", said Michelle. "I didn't bother to write them all down while taping. I just took stuff I liked at the time from everyone else's music collections."

" 'Better Deaf and Dumb from the First' ", muttered Seanna, barely awake, lying mainly face-down on a pillow on the couch.

"Which group?" asked Aidan, curious to know.

"Syrinx", muttered Seanna. "1970s, Toronto."

"Never heard of them", said Tad.

Seanna lifted her head from the pillow. "You showed me the record once, Mish. Your dad bought it because of one song and didn't listen much to it afterward."

"I never understood that about you", said Wendy to Seanna. "How do you remember stuff like that all the time?"

"Dunno", answered Seanna. "I remember everything. Sometimes, too much." By the time Seanna finished speaking, the song they were listening to was fading away, going but never gone, something that, by Seanna's reckoning, happened to a lot of 60s and 70s CanCon.

"That one I know. From Katy's collection", said Michelle, as 'Let's Dance' by David Bowie came on. "It was originally from Eileen's collection but she passed it off to Katy. Katy didn't mind me borrowing it. We used to share stuff all the time. But Eileen sure got pissed off that I borrowed it."

"What did it matter to Eileen?" said Aidan. "She gave it away to Katy. Ergo, it was Katy's decision."

"My family is a mystery to most people", said Michelle. "Now you can see why I turned out normal."

"Hah!" said Tad.

"Normal is overrated", said Seanna. "Be yourself. Always keep'em guessing."

Michelle laughed.

"So that record: Was it long out of the plastic wrap when you borrowed it?" asked Aidan.

"Oh yeah", said Michelle. "Eileen liked one song on it, and I think Katy played it, like, once? She was more a fan of 'Heroes' than anything else."

"I love that album", said Tad, smiling.

"I used to joke about the music on this tape being from before my time", said Michelle.

"And that's why you still like it?" asked Tad.

"There are two things I've learned about good music", said Michelle. "One, it's subjective; and two, it never gets old."

"True enough", said Aidan. "I still like Duran Duran after all this time, and I have nothing to say sorry for."

"But not what they became, right?" said Seanna.

"Got it in one, Seanna", said Aidan. "Just the first three albums for me."

"U2 lost me at Achtung Baby", said Tad.

"I'm with Tad on that", said Seanna. "But I will defend the artist's prerogative to change whenever."

Most of them nodded in agreement.

"I have so much catching up to do", said Wendy. "I don't know what any of you are talking about."

"No surprise. You listen to commercial radio in a region", said Seanna. "Everything you hear there is dictated by somebody in another city, far, far away."

Wendy looked cross at Seanna. Wendy wasn't sure how she felt about that last comment. She was unsure whether Seanna was being condescending or judgemental.

"You can borrow from my collection, if you want", said Aidan to Wendy, hoping to defuse some of Wendy's tension. "Besides, once Adam gets into teenage, he'll get into music you've never heard of. Then things'll get interesting."

"That worries me", said Wendy.

"Why should it?" asked Michelle. "You always take an interest in him. So don't let his teenage years be any different."

Wendy smiled, but then took a deep breath, her eyes almost bulging. "Excuse me", she said, getting up to run to the washroom.

"Guess she couldn't hold it in", said Michelle. "Aidan?"

"Hmm?"

"Just how much have you added to your music collection since high-school?"

"Lots", said Aidan. "I've lost count. Too much?"

"What's 'too much'?" asked Tad, smirking. "I'm not familiar with that expression."

Seanna looked blankly at Tad. "Incredible."

"How did you get 'too much', Aidan?" asked Michelle, smiling at Seanna's reaction.

"DJing at university radio for about two years", said Aidan. "I got a lot of music out of that, some of it really awful stuff."

A loud retching noise came from the bathroom. It was Wendy.

"So awful that just the mention of it makes Wendy wanna ralph", said Tad.

At that point, in came Maureen with Robert, who'd been at Maureen's for a while.

Michelle rushed over to hug her dad. "Oh, she let you out late tonight, didn't she, Da?"

"Hey Mr. B!" said Tad. "What's new?"

Aidan smiled but decided to remain as unassuming as possible. He was never completely sure that Robert had taken to him all those years ago. Michelle's mother had adored Aidan. Robert just had a certain way of looking at people that made you doubt yourself. Aidan still didn't know it but Robert liked him a lot and was just messing with him. Robert looked at Aidan for a few seconds before smiling at him.

Another loud noise from the bathroom.

"What the...?" said Maureen, going over to the bathroom. "Are you okay in there?"

"Fine", replied Wendy. "No worries. I'll live."

"I guess she had a little too much to drink", said Tad, to much laughter.

"Kind of like on grad night", said Michelle.

"Except she didn't touch any alcohol that time, 'cause she was pregnant", said Tad.

"And she didn't drink tonight", said Aidan.

They all looked at each other, wide-eyed and stark still. There was an awkward pause in the room before Maureen broke it, saying, "Well, try to keep things down in here. Da's going to sleep soon, and the noise could be too much."

"No. No, it's okay", said their father, trying to smile. "There is always a demand for laughter in this house. Good for the soul. That, and a good night's sleep. Or so your mother used to say."

Lauranne arrived just as Wendy was coming out of the bathroom. She turned to see Michelle and everyone else sitting in the living room.

Maureen took one look at Wendy. "How long have you been doing that?"

"A little while now", answered Wendy.

"Well, I suggest you lay off the drinking for the next little while", said Maureen. "That's just a suggestion, of course."

"Well, I didn't touch anything tonight, but duly noted", said Wendy.

After

"I don't want you there", said Seanna.

"Why's that?" asked Michelle.

The café was silent today, save for the music that Kim played at low volume. Any conversation in the place was subdued at best.

"I want to be alone when I die. I prefer..." Seanna paused then shook her head. "I want to be cremated and have my ashes spread over the Fraser. No audience."

Michelle sighed. "Rather morbid today, aren't we?"

"Mish, I'm dying. Tomorrow could be it for me, or two years from now. Who knows?"

"I was going to lay some flowers on your grave, but I guess I'll have to throw kelp to chase after your ashes."

"They'll never catch up."

They both laughed. Michelle felt one eye water up. "Why on Earth did you stop taking your medication?"

"Better to live for something and then die happy. It beats just surviving from day to day. B'sides, could you've imagined me at the grad reunion, all hopped up on meds? I'd've been a total space-case. I wanted to be me, one more time."

"But..."

"I've lived life to its fullest. I don't regret a single thing I've done. I wanted to see you all again, but as me." Seanna sipped her tea. "And, once and for all, I wanted to stop seeing Holly."

"Holly?"

"Yeah. Holly. Whenever I zoned out... the meds... I don't know. I hallucinated, or dreamt, of her. Every time. I needed to let go."

"I didn't know."

"Mish, not even Tad knows, and next to me, Tad knows everything."

"It was sad what happened..."

"She would've done it at some point", Seanna said, all too matter-of-factly.

Michelle was taken aback by Seanna's attitude.

"Holly was depressed. The smile, the attitude, the good nature? All fake. Most of the time. Not many people knew."

"Not even Tad?"

"No. Yes. I don't know."

Michelle looked at Seanna strangely.

"Yes, I have my moments", Seanna continued. "For Tad, I suspect yes. At some point, Tad started smoking weed, maybe to dull what he knew. He stopped after Holly died." Seanna shook her head again. "He left after that and finished his studies living from his old basement apartment in Kits." Seanna paused again to sip her tea. "Yeah. Holly. Once I stopped the meds, she disappeared."

"Do you even see her in your dreams?"

"No. Just in my memories: Clearly in two of them, but the rest all blur together."

"Which two memories?"

Seanna looked at Michelle somewhat sadly. "The one of the last time I saw her, really saw her, before she hanged herself. The other: the last time I 'saw' her."

"And when you 'saw' her that last time: How did she look to you?"

Seanna smiled, looking to the side. "Contented."

"There's another perfect image then."

Seanna looked at Michelle, curiously.

"You saw her then as you wanted others to see you at the grad reunion", said Michelle.

"I think I did the right thing", said Seanna, still smiling. She then looked about and then searched for something in earnest. "Here", she said, handing a book to Michelle. "Take it. It's yours. No charge."

"Seanna, I'll be leaving in a week. I've never been the quickest reader..."

"I know."

"So I'm not sure when I can give this back to you."

"Never lend a book or music."

Michelle laughed a little. "Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

"Aidan forgot not long ago and tried to return a tape I made for him back in high school. He was sternly rebuked for that."

Michelle smiled. "He always had the impression that you made that music for him."

"I did." Seanna leaned forward slightly. "But don't tell him that."

They laughed.

Seanna continued: "Here's a comp tape for you. You still have a tape player, right?"

"Somewhere back home, yeah."

"I made this especially for you", Seanna said, pointing to the cassette.

Michelle looked at the song list that Seanna had written on the case jacket but didn't seem to recognize anything.

"Listen to it and keep your ears open. Those artists could be famous one day. Or not. Who cares? It's good music, and I made it for you. And don't think of trying to give it back to me!" Seanna smiled.

Michelle smiled and saluted. "Yes, ma'am!"

Drew and Adam stood there, smiling, waiting for Wendy, their warmth welcome. She was still thinking about Seanna. She hadn't taken the bad news about Seanna's health very well. Even after high-school and the Commune, when Wendy went off and lived a house mom's life, she still thought of Seanna often. Seanna felt the same way.

Even after arriving home, Wendy still thought of Seanna. Wendy attempted to return to her usual routine right after but Drew reminded her that she'd been on the road for five hours and recommended that she rest up til tomorrow. A call from Hatzquiam wouldn't let her.

"I heard you were in Hatzquiam." It was Wendy's mother.

"That's right", Wendy said, stiffly. "It was my grad reunion."

"How long were you down here?"

"Just a week."

"And there was no time to visit us?"

"Uh, yeah, my time was limited. Y'know. Friends and other family."

"But no time for your parents?"

The conversation paused. Wendy wasn't really sure how to respond to this. She didn't want to get into a shouting match with her mother over the phone and certainly not within earshot of her immediate family.

"Wendy?"

"Look, Ma, I really don't want to have this conversation", said Wendy, attempting to turn the other cheek.

Then came her mother's turn for an awkward pause. "But I thought...", Wendy's mom started to say, a little nervously.

"...that you and Pa take priority over everyone else?"

"Honour your father and your mother", said Wendy's mom.

"Oh, Ma, don't quote scripture to me", said Wendy, her cheek getting sore. The memory of Maggie egged her on. "Besides, dishonour in this case means to hit or curse, not 'not be perfect'. And how about loving your children. All of them. Unconditionally?" Wendy turned to look at her son. "Adam, sweetie, come here please."

"Yeah?" asked Adam.

"I'd like you to say hi to the nice woman on the phone."

"Wendy, don't...", said her mom.

"Hello?", said Adam, taking the phone. All he could hear was slight breathing on the other end but no one speaking. He looked at Wendy and shook his head. "Who is it?"

"Your grandma", said Wendy in singing tones. She took the phone from Adam.

"My grandma?" asked Adam, looking puzzled. He had never known those grandparents.

"It's okay. Never mind, sweetie. Go. I'll join you soon."

"Okay", said Adam, walking back to the table to do his jigsaw puzzle.

"Still there, Ma?" asked Wendy in a subdued voice. Again, slight breathing. "That was your grandson, someone who's more important to me than pretty much anyone else. My husband, my friends, and certain family members all tie for a very close second, but Adam is first."

There was a heavy inhale on the other end. "Adam? That sounds like a good name. I don't think anyone in our family is named Adam."

"No, nobody else is. Aidan told me so."

"Aidan? John's boy?"

"Your nephew. My cousin. Carolan's brother, etcetera, etcetera. Yeah, him. He's kinda the family record keeper, now that Maggie's gone."

"I heard. John told me. Surprising, seeing how much John keeps things to himself."

Wendy smiled, though she had no intention of letting her mother know it. But it was true: Her Uncle John was like that. "Ma, all this talk about me visiting you but you've yet to visit us. So? How will we undo all this?"

Another sigh on the other end: "I don't know. Your father and I have some time off next spring. Perhaps we could stop by for a visit."

"And Pa has no problem with this?"

"Um, I haven't proposed it to him yet."

"Well, let me know what he says and then we'll see, and not a moment sooner. If he says no, then you'll have to forgive me if I'm not surprised."

"You're not going to forgive him, are you?"

"I'd like to, Ma, but according to him, I'm not even his daughter anymore. Still and all, I really do wish things hadn't turned out the way they did. I mean, was it so unreasonable for me to want you two to be present at my wedding? Did he ever stop to think for one minute that maybe I wanted a normal life from Day One? That I wanted to start having kids once I was with someone? That I wanted my own father to give me away at my own wedding, even if it is a questionable, outdated custom? Well, that's not how things worked out for me. In all fairness, I've played the game of life the best I can with what I've had and by others, and I'm determined to make sure my kid never goes through what I went through. But truth be told, things would've gone a heck of a lot better during that time if I'd had at least moral support or even a little encouragement just once in a while from my parents."

Brief silence on the other end: "Well, I don't quite know what to say."

"And I think I've said all that I'm going to say. Call me again when Pa decides he's my father", said Wendy, hanging up, without saying goodbye.

There followed silence, save for the crescendo of Wendy grinding her teeth. She relaxed a bit, unclenching, but her hands were still shaking. She then took a deep breath when she realized that she'd been in control of that situation right until the end. She felt a pang of regret in having talked to her mother like that. She could start crying at any moment, more out of frustration than anything else. She then laughed in little convulsions, small and noiseless, before stopping. She smiled. She'd won. She'd set her terms and let her parents hang on those terms. She knew that they would either have to take care around her from now on or never speak to her again. Either way, she had won.

Drew was standing there, smiling a little smile. Wendy got startled a bit when he softly cleared his throat. "So?" he said, still smiling, eyebrows raised.

Wendy turned around, ran to him, and hugged him warmly. "I feel like a great weight has been taken off me!" She kissed him. "Thank you so much for all these years! You're always so supportive of me!"

Drew smiled contently. "Oh, I looked into what you asked me about."

Wendy's eyes flitted left-right for a second before they went wide. "And?"

"Transportation, food, amenities: Those are all yours. But they said you can have the place free for a week."

Wendy smiled and sighed. "It looks like I'll be leaving you again for a while. I hope you can manage without me. Again."

"We'll live. Plus, you believe you need time by yourself, and that's what counts. Besides, if I didn't trust you, I wouldn't have married you in the first place. And in any case, Adam's becoming quite the helper around the house."

Adam looked up from his puzzle. "I made my first pizza!"

"Really?" asked Wendy, skeptically.

"Actually, it was good", said Drew.

"Daddy helped me", said Adam.

"And we didn't burn down the house either."

Wendy laughed. "I guess I'll have to teach you a few more tricks when I get back."

Michelle needed some time alone. Her visit with Seanna put her in this state. She'd called Eileen prior to setting out from Vancouver at Eileen's Bayline salon about the possibility of getting a lift home later on, considering it was Thursday and Eileen normally closed up shop around 6pm. Eileen had moved into a three-bedroom townhouse in a new development just outside of Bayline, putting her within walking distance of her salon, but she still had the odd thing to move out of the rec-room in her dad's place, providing the cat didn't mind. Michelle had a few hours to kill and figured on doing it where she was born.

She'd always found it curious how her parents ended up out here. Her dad and mom had each grown up in rural areas, each in different countries. So it was all the more curious that they ended up so close to the sea. But then again, it was a question of where her dad had been stationed and what he'd done with his new degree in engineering. When the opportunity came up to go out west, her dad jumped at it. For her mom, it was the second time in her life that she'd made a major move, the first time across the ocean with the family she'd been born into, and second time across a continent with the family she'd created.

In coming back here this time, it was the first and only time since coming back to BC that she'd visited Bayline without another family member present. She was alone, and this wasn't a bad thing.

Thursday was a no-class, sleep-in day for Tad, and the first time since last week that he didn't have to be up at the crack of five for any reason. It was also a catch-up kind of day: with studies, with cleaning up his place, with organizing his effects, especially his music collection. By early afternoon, everything was up to date, even his meals.

It was a bright sunny day and much warmer than normal for late September. Tad figured to grab a drink from his fridge and sit out on his balcony and just enjoy the view. The pleasure in that lasted all of 10 minutes before he decided he was officially bored.

He hit a local café just one street over and down from his place, ordered a coffee, and tried to draw something on a sketchpad. Nothing came to mind. Time passed more quickly than he'd imagined. On taking a sip of his coffee, he wondered if he should've cut to the chase and ordered iced coffee in the first place. He felt restless all of a sudden.

"Down to the beach!"

John turned 55 on Wednesday following the grad reunion, and he always insisted that, if anyone was going to hold a birthday party for him, it had to be on the precise day and month and not the nearest weekend. Following this, Aidan and Talia had some time for themselves and headed to Bayline.

Talia wasn't sure she understood Aidan's attachment to Bayline. He'd never struck her as a by-the-sea type. Then again, she'd only ever really known him in cities and near fields. His like for Bayline would only ever be a mystery to her.

She noticed him smiling. She smiled, too, content to walk with him arm-in-arm. As long as he was happy, so was she.

Aidan wondered at how things had gone the other night at Michelle's. At the leaving, she'd hugged him tightly for what seemed like hours. He'd forgotten how she felt against his body, how she smelled. The trip back was nice; he wished he could've held her longer but had to let go at some point. He let go. And he let go. Relieved, he smiled.

He and Talia started to feel hungry. Aidan knew just the place to go to, hoping it still existed.

Michelle walked along the waterfront on the recently re-done promenade. She thought back to what Maureen had said some months ago: That things were better when the family lived near Bayline. At the old train station, since moved back from the rails, she approached someone sitting on a bench, looking out at the water, sketchpad and pencil in hands. She thought he looked familiar.

"The train doesn't stop here anymore, Sir", joked Michelle, affecting an English accent. "You are so S.O.L."

The man turned and looked at her. "Haha. Very funny, Lister", said Tad. "At least I'm not some old guy waiting at a bus stop for a bus that never comes."

"Eh?"

"Ghost World? Comic book? No? Oh, never mind. I wondered whether I'd see you before you leave. Again."

"Well, I did try to call you. By the way, you have a voice message from me."

"What? That you're coming out my way?"

"Well, duh?"

"And that you'd like to go to dinner with a good-looking guy, but since the're all taken, you thought you'd settle for me, right?"

"Ha! You wish! Oh, wait: I don't have to meet up with Eileen for a few more hours. And I am hungry. Okay, dinner it is then."

Five Fishies at the Bend, at the east end of the east beach, owing to warmer-than-seasonal weather, was open later than normal, which was perfect for this fish & chip shack with picnic tables outside. The owner told Tad and Michelle it was its last year in this function; something about how it was going to be converted into a "west coast bar and grill" under its new owners, this being the new in-thing, fish-n-chips apparently becoming passé.

"Kinda like the old Hatzquiam Hotel, isn't it? Same ol' story about changing times." It was Aidan, along with Talia.

The owner laughed a little and said, kind of regretfully, "That's what the new owners want to do with this place. Can't see that lasting long, though. Of course, there are other places up the drag serving fish & chips."

"Sure, all indoors. You eat there for the same price as two people do here", said Aidan, also regretfully. "This is still my favourite place after all these years."

"Mine, too", said Michelle.

"Ditto", said Tad.

"I'm just tagging along", said Talia.

"Makes me regret going into retirement!" said the owner, laughing.

"Don't tell me: You'll move up to the Okanagan. You'll have a good view of one of the lakes, except that a neighbour and the main highway will be blocking it, right?" asked Aidan, getting a sense of déjà vu.

"Nope", said the owner. "I'm right on the lakefront, in fact."

Talia looked at Aidan and wanted to laugh, knowing what had happened to the bartender at the old Hatzquiam Hotel.

Aidan also wondered about people moving away from the big city to retire. For sure, it was quieter in the regions when compared to Vancouver. But a number of these places didn't have good public transport and were quite car-oriented.

"It's one thing to move up there when you hit 60 or 65 but will you still be able to drive your car 20 years on? Will they even have the money to pay someone to drive them around, say, in a taxi? Tricky proposition."

"Well, I'm sure it's a nice property and you'll have many quiet days there", said Aidan.

"I'm looking forward to it, though, truth be told, I'll miss this place."

Time passed quickly before Michelle realized that she had to be somewhere else 10 minutes gone. Before any degree of panic could set in, up drove a familiar car. It was Eileen, along with Katy. Eileen shook her head somewhat comically.

"I tell you this time and that place, and look where you are. Seriously", said Eileen.

"How'd you know to come here?" asked Michelle.

Without even turning to look at her, Eileen thumb-pointed to Katy. "How else?"

"This was always your favourite place. Hello Aidan. Hello Tad. I don't think we've met", said Katy, looking at Talia.

"Not sure what all this will do for my figure", said Eileen, having received her supper.

Michelle looked stunned at Eileen. "You are not serious."

"Nothing, most likely", said Katy, "unless you were to eat it every day."

"Like you have anything to worry about, you of pencil-thin physique", said Eileen. "You could eat oceans of fish and fields of potatoes and still never gain weight."

"Oh, Eileen, don't you know that Katy has a hollow leg?" quipped Michelle.

"I blame genetics", said Katy.

Aidan and Tad smiled during all of this. Talia looked at them both curiously.

"So", started Talia, "you're sisters, right?"

"Yup", said Michelle, "three of five."

"Juuuuust checking", said Talia, then doing a double-take. "Hold the phone: Five?"

"Yeah, five. The other two are off having fun. We're the serious ones in the family", said Michelle, jokingly.

Tad and Aidan chuckled lightly.

Talia smiled at them both.

"I remember your mom being the serious one most of the time", said Tad. "Your dad was the joker."

"Still is", said Eileen. "After he came out of the hospital recently, he had Maureen look all over the place for a blue tie that didn't exist."

"Yeah, then Mo remembered that Da hated blue anything", said Katy, turning to the others. "It's a political thing."

"Oh yeah", said Michelle, "once a *rouge*, always a *rouge*."

"In any case, Da found it funny. But if Maureen weren't already a nurse, she'd've probably sent Da back to the hospital in traction", said Eileen.

"I think he pulled something like that on your mom when we were in Grade Seven", Tad said, looking at Michelle.

"M'ma didn't like that at all", said Katy, looking at Michelle, then at Tad, smiling. "If looks could kill, she'd have put him in the ground *tout-de-suite*."

Talia looked again at Aidan then Tad, still curious, still smiling.

"But she did have her funny moments", said Eileen.

"Yeh, usually getting back at Da", said Michelle.

"She could be vengeful like that", said Katy. "I remember when I was in Grade Ten. She took his car keys and swapped key rings with his house keys. He was fumin' after that."

"So that's what changed about your house, Mish", said Tad. "Your dad must've moved it a foot back from the road when he stuck his car keys in the house door, didn't he?"

Katy laughed.

"Har-har. Smart-ass", said Michelle. "Do they pay you by the word for that?"

"No, but I'll be paid lots by the hour in a few years for other things. I'll try to be affordable", said Tad.

"Ah, that's right", said Talia. "It's the lawyer's life for you."

Eileen looked at Tad a little confused. "Woah. Did I miss something here? Lawyer? When did you make that grade?"

"Haven't yet", said Tad, "I'm back in school again, studying law."

"And living up the hill, here, if I remember correctly", said Michelle.

"Must be a nice view", said Katy, smiling and looking directly at Tad.

"A very nice view, yes", said Tad, smiling back.

"So Aidan, where are you and Talia living now?" asked Eileen.

"In a nice two-bedroom apartment, in a quiet neighbourhood, in Victoria", said Aidan.

"That's recent, too, isn't it?" asked Tad.

"For him, yes", responded Talia. "For me, no. I've been there for a few years. Mel was my roommate until she finished her law degree at UVic last year. Aidan came in and took her place."

"So one of you did follow your dad in the legal profession", said Katy. "Has she been admitted to the bar?"

"Yep. She's still in Victoria. Working with a law firm there", said Aidan.

"Not working at your dad's firm?" asked Eileen.

Aidan hesitated. "It's... complicated."

"Say no more", said Eileen. "And what did you study, Talia?"

"Administration", said Talia. "I work for the government now."

"Just like that cousin of yours, eh Aidan?" said Tad.

"Yeh. Liam. One of my Saskatchewan family."

"I met him at the wedding, right?" asked Talia.

"Yup."

"Yeah. So, you have a Liam in your family, Aidan?" asked Michelle. "I have a nephew named Liam. Lauranne's twin."

"Oh yeah. 'Little Sis'?" said Aidan.

"Yeah, but not so little anymore", said Michelle. "In fact, she just started at UBC."

"I didn't get much chance to chat with her the last time. I imagine she's having a blast at university."
"Not at much as you'd think. Her mom has her under a strict schedule", said Michelle.
"Schedule? Try curfew", quipped Eileen. "I'm not even that strict with my kids."
"They grow up so fast", said Tad. "One year you're tickling them, and the next they're swearing like sailors and graduating from high-school."
Eileen glared at Tad. He took no notice.
"Relax, Eileen", said Katy. "Your kids will probably be saints."
"So, wedding, Aidan", Michelle hesitated yet wanted to get away from the subject of children swearing. "When did you two get hitched? I saw your rings at the reunion."
Aidan and Talia looked at each other, smiling sweetly. "Last July."
"We had the wedding in Saskatchewan", said Talia.
"Talia's got family there, too, and we wanted to have as many people as possible present."
Katy looked at Michelle then at Tad. She smiled at him again. Again, he returned the smile. Eileen ate her food, not really noticing anything.
"Wow", said Michelle, feigning interest, trying to keep her smile, then nodding a bit. "That's great."
"You look tired, Mish", said Katy. "Long day?"
"Very."
"Yeah, I think it's been long for us all", said Eileen.
Michelle looked at Aidan and Talia, smiling. "Yeah. Sorry. It really has been a long day."
"Hey, if you're tired, you're tired", said Aidan.
"Everyone has their limits", said Talia. "There's no sin in sleeping, if you need it."
Michelle smiled sincerely at Talia.
"Let's get you home, Mish", said Eileen.
"Keep in touch everyone", said Michelle. "Oh, Aidan. Might be a good idea to visit Seanna sooner rather than later."
Aidan nodded knowingly.
"Hey Mish?" said Tad.
"Yeh?"
"Next time."
"Yeah. Next time", she responded, smiling.
"No, I mean next time", he said emphatically, smiling and pointing.
Michelle looked at Tad strangely before realizing what he was trying to say. "Oh, you wish!" she said, laughing.
"We'll see about that", said Tad, also laughing. "We'll see."
After they drove off, Aidan asked Tad, "Next time?"
"Milles Bournes. She always kicks my ass at it. So, next time."
Talia laughed. "Were you so competitive back in high school?"
"Pretty much", said Aidan. "Michelle taught everyone Milles Bournes and then promptly schooled them all."
"And Seanna was the queen of Scrabble, wasn't she?" said Tad. "Still is."
"Yeah, I know!" said Aidan. "Even in her current state, she still bested me."
"Mish is no slouch in the game, either", said Tad. "We're about even now, Mish & I." Tad turned to Talia. "It's all in fun, of course."
"Oh, I'm sure", said Talia. She zeroed in on Aidan. "We should play Scrabble one day, Aidan."
"But, but, but, I'll lose to you after three games, I'm sure", said Aidan, laughing. "But okay. Let's."
Talia smiled but then shivered. "Is there a washroom around here?"
"Around the right side", said Tad. "Ask the owner for the key."
"Thanks." Talia left.
Tad stared knowingly at Aidan for a bit.
"Spill it", said Aidan.
"Was pickin' up some odd vibes when Mish & company were here."
Aidan smiled. "Memories... seeing her again... I dunno."
"You're married, mun."

"I didn't say I wasn't in love with Talia. She's great. She's my love, my world."

"But?"

"I don't know. Even being with Talia, there were times when I asked myself whether Michelle would approve, or even what she'd think." Aidan shook his head a little. "But that feeling never lasts long." Aidan smiled. "I love my wife."

Tad continued to smile and look at Aidan. "Yeah, I love your wife, too."

"Hah! Take a number."

"Should I mention that I also got those vibes offa Michelle, too? I'm tellin' ya, she probably feels as effed up over you as you do her. The only diff is she doesn't have that special someone that you have."

"Yet."

"Yet."

"Maybe she doesn't need anyone", offered Aidan.

"Need? Never. But want?"

Aidan looked at Tad curiously.

"Aidan, she's always wanted someone."

Aidan sat silent.

Tad continued: "She just never shows it, does she?"

Talia came back. "It's cooling down a bit, Aidan. Should we head out?"

Tad cut in. "Might be a good idea for me too, no? I have to get up early tomorrow morning for classes. Back to the grind."

"And back to J-n-J's for us", said Aidan.

"When are you two due back in Victoria?" asked Tad.

"Soon", said Talia.

"We'll ship out tomorrow", said Aidan.

"Back to the grind for us, too", said Talia.

"I bet!", said Tad. "Keep in touch, my friends. Off into the sunset I go!"

As Tad walked off, Talia smiled at Aidan and said, "He's a curious type."

"Who, Tad? Yeah, that's him all 'round. Never a dull moment", said Aidan, as they started making their way back uphill to where Aidan had parked his car.

"Your ex is also interesting person. So's her family, it seems."

"What you saw of them, yeah. Most of the rest are, too."

"Most?"

"I never knew her brother – Max was his name. Died before I came along. Tad met him once. 'Tall & proud', Tad said."

"Tad's pretty tall."

"Tad was only 12 when he met Max. Tad wasn't always the same height", said Aidan, smirking.

"I know, you clown", said Talia, playfully punching Aidan in the shoulder.

Katy and Michelle occupied the back seats, saying nothing, each looking out their sides of Eileen's car. Things seemed darker than they should have – travelling away from the setting sun had a way of doing that. Eventually, Eileen had to say something.

"A little quiet back there. One might think you were dead." She looked in her rear-view. "I hope not. If you were dead, I'd have a lot of explaining to do. And the paperwork would be a bitch."

Michelle was lost in thoughts of the other night at her place. Aidan was the only person she'd hugged firmly and without hesitation since her incident last spring. His form against hers: She hadn't felt this in a long time; a reconnection with her earlier self; in a safer time, with a safer person. She'd felt strangely drained by this, but not in a bad way.

"Nothing to say?" asked Eileen.

"It's a lovely night", said Michelle, warm evening wind caressing her face through window's small opening.

"Yeah", said Katy, smiling, "the night sky is lovely."

"Well, I suppose that's better than nothing", muttered Eileen. "Were the fish and chips like you remember, Mish?"

"Yup. Just like I remember", said Michelle, blankly.

"Tad's a little more confident than I remember", said Eileen.

"He's been through a lot", said Michelle, waking from her blank state.

"Being through a lot changes you", said Katy, "and not always for the better. But Tad does seem different. Still a bit cocky but more grown-up, perhaps? I think I agree with Eileen."

Michelle looked strangely at Katy. She softened her look and then smiled.

Eileen occasionally glanced in her rear-view, watching those two looking at each other and not entirely sure how to read them.

"Doctor's office", said Tad, answering his phone, beer bottle recently opened. "We've got patients. Have you?"

"Heh! That's one I haven't heard before." It was Katy. "I got your number from Mish. Coffee sometime?"

"Sounds great", said Tad, smiling.

On the ferry ride back, Talia got bored with just water and ships and fell asleep on Aidan's right shoulder. Aidan continued to look at the watery scenery all the same, finding it meditative. At some point, the ferry entered Active Pass and then wended its way between the Gulf Islands. Aidan recalled a news story from his youth about how a large open-decked ferry had swung too far to starboard, grounding. One of the local dailies published a photo showing said ferry tilting dangerously and some highway trucks it carried leaning over then succumbing to gravity, crushing other vehicles. Their brakes couldn't help them then. He remembered hearing that the only casualty was a racehorse. He wondered if Talia had heard of this back then. She was fond of horses.

Aidan thought about fish & chips and the people he was with a day ago. He'd long come to terms that most of his thoughts about Michelle were related to places they'd visited together, but that this didn't take into account certain feelings he'd had about her. After some reflection, he realized that her family was like that of his Prairie cousins. That, and he wished his immediate family had been like hers.

"I hope my future family can be that way. Good times, bad times, arguments, celebrations – no matter. Nat and I will do our best."

Wendy knew she was doing the right thing. No hubby, no kid, no friends, just herself. She went on vacation. A real vacation.

She wanted to be left alone. News of Seanna's health on her previous visit still weighed heavily on her. They were once very close up until she moved out of the Commune. After that, they drifted apart bit by bit until she could feel this gulf between them at the grad reunion. In wanting to raise and be there for Adam, she had limited herself to only her immediate surroundings and whatever the TV and radio had brought to her. That was her world.

Seanna was Seanna; Seanna remained Seanna; Seanna always remembered names, places, people, events, things, little things – little things like names of songs by groups from far away places; far away places, where Seanna said self-important people decided what people like Wendy should listen to on her regional commercial radio station.

Drew said he'd take care of things for a while and told her not to worry. She decided to go off for 10 days. She and Seanna met up again for tea and had a long conversation. For the first time according to Wendy, Seanna apologized for the odd occasion when she had come off as snobbish. Seanna also took the opportunity to tell Wendy how much their friendship meant to her, how much she had missed Wendy all this time, how it was good to see her again.

Wendy was relieved to hear that. Wendy said she felt she needed to get out and learn a little more about the outside world. She had missed too much for too long. Everything seemed new but confusing to her. Before going back to her regular life, she needed to be away from everything, everyone. Seanna gave Wendy home-copied tapes of music she'd been listening to. There were times when

people thought Seanna was a music snob, but she was quite open about sharing what she liked. She was someone who wrote to small record labels far away and order new releases from them. She was ahead of any campus radio station in the Vancouver area, and those were way ahead of commercial radio there.

Wendy looked at one tape: "*Tigermilk?*"

"Yeah", said Seanna. "I think you'll like it."

Wendy smiled but was concerned. Seanna looked worse than she had the morning after the grad reunion. This pre-occupied her thoughts on the ferry ride over.

Aidan, Talia, and Melanie were Wendy's next visits, and they'd assured her that they'd all keep in touch. Aidan had made Wendy some compilation tapes of music he'd heard from his university days. He noticed that Wendy was more confident than she'd been in years. She hadn't told him about the phone conversation with her mother.

Seaside, the day after Victoria, she unpacked grocery bags and bedding. She wasn't really sure what to make of this place. There was electricity but not for everything. There was only cold running water but it was nothing a lit stove and big kettle couldn't fix. It seemed secure enough. Once all settled in, she pulled out a notebook that Aidan had given her. He said that she should try to keep a journal when she can. Wendy smiled at this idea but figured that nothing would really come of it. She wasn't the type to write thoughts out on paper.

Time passed and she'd listened to the tapes which Aidan and Seanna had compiled for her. Aside from that, she did nothing. It was the first time in ages that she'd had nothing to do. Even when she and Drew took vacations, she had to keep an eye on Adam. But now? Nothing. As the music played, she looked out on the waves of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Not quite the Pacific Ocean, but close to it. In one of the songs, she heard a cello and thought about the possibility of taking it up again – she played it when she was younger. At some point, she decided to shut off the music and just listen to the waves. Meditative.

Notebook from Aidan out, pen clicked open, she started writing down some thoughts, smiling as she did this. She was pleased with herself.

Seanna looked outside. Clouds rolling in.

There'd be rain; one day.

On her periphery, a stranger,

Checking grains of sand.

Sun slowly disappeared.

She smiled.

Epilogue

A voice message. Natalia's doctor. Confirmation. Something she'd felt for a little while now.

Aidan smiled, waiting for her to say something.

She nodded, smiling, eyebrows raised.

The phone rang. "So? When's my nephew or niece due?" asked Melanie.

"Spooky how she seems to know these things", thought Aidan.

She looked at her belly, rubbing it gently, smiled, and wondered when this little bun was going to come out of the oven.

Wendy wrote a lot in her journal, using up all but two pages. She wondered if there was a story in all that. Maybe in a quieter moment, there'd be time to make something of it all. For now, she was ready to leave this peaceful place for home. Home offered peace of another sort, and she couldn't wait to get back to it.

He put on a fall jacket.

"Fall jacket for fall weather."

The weather had gotten cooler since he last saw Michelle, Aidan, and the rest a few days earlier. Tad had no desire to get a chill: He simply wanted to wave goodbye.

He and Katy had met up the day before in Hatzquiam and gone for coffee at some new place along the old main drag. It was the first time in a long while that Tad had really visited Hatzquiam. Michelle's and the grad reunion didn't count.

Katy quipped about someone having driven by three times, always playing "Karma Chameleon", and wondered if the driver had it on a play loop. They found this amusing. Equally amusing was someone else who'd driven around in an early-80s Camaro that had definitely seen better days. Tad called this car the "bondo-mobile", which popped loudly but in doing so at least had the decency to be on-beat with the music in the café.

Tad let Katy know straight off the bat that he thought dating was such a put-on and that he'd never been particularly good at it. Katy was cool enough to say that there was no rush and just take things slowly.

He allowed himself a smile as he trekked downhill.

The southbound to Seattle left Pacific Central only once a day, in the evenings. A customs agent at the station wondered why Michelle didn't have a driver's license. Michelle thought her passport was more than sufficient as ID. This peeved her.

"Good enough for other countries."

She didn't feel bad about leaving Hatzquiam. She'd done it before. It got easier each time. She didn't hate Hatzquiam, but she felt should be somewhere else. She didn't know where, just not here.

She thought of Aidan again. She thought he seemed quite happy. In a way, Michelle still loved him.

"You can be long-over someone, but they'll always occupy a piece of your heart."

She wondered briefly what might've happened had she and Aidan stayed together, that maybe things could've worked out.

The train had yet to leave the station. Michelle studied from her forward-facing seat as much of her train's platform, bound by barbed-wire fences.

"Bullshit", she muttered.

She knew that she and Aidan would've ended eventually; better it sooner than later. She didn't want to feel confined by any stretch without first having experienced life on her own terms. As nice and romantic as early marriage sounded to some, it wasn't for her.

She recalled Mrs. Thomas' words: About the look in her nephew's eyes that said "not yet but someday". Michelle had no idea who Mrs. Thomas' nephew was but felt a little less alone knowing there was someone else in the world who felt like she did.

She thought it better that her future lay elsewhere, free of people who thought of her as she'd been rather than the person she'd grown into. Here, she was the youngest child again, her adult-self sidelined, which felt comfortable for a while, considering what had happened faraway some months ago. But it became too comfortable. Her sisters, and even those at the grad reunion, seemed to have lives; once back in Hatzquiam, the life Michelle had had had ceased to exist.

She smiled, thinking about Katy. She wondered how things would turn out between Katy and Tad, in dating and in each one's professional lives. She knew they were facing their own sets of unknowns and variables and hoped each would be okay.

"Katy was right when she said that Tad had changed. Certainly, he'd never taken an interest in her before. That's different."

Tad had taken news of Seanna's failing health quite hard, and Michelle found it difficult to tell him, especially over the phone. She told him to check on her soon, in case there was no later.

She pulled out the sizeable tome Seanna had given her. Michelle recalled Seanna saying she'd found it at a second-hand bookstore on Pender and it should last Michelle all the way to Sacramento or equivalent distance. Seanna had also said to keep in touch: Michelle hoped she wouldn't have to buy an Ouija board to do this.

She managed only one paragraph before she realized why she'd been on the wrong track regarding Aidan. She still loved him, sure, but she also admired him because he did what he wanted, not caring what others thought, not thinking about others' approval.

She smiled, thinking of him, and hoped for the best in his life.

Owen never liked passing through customs, never mind where. He'd always had this fear that nobody would let him pass because of his long, hippie-looking hair. It was not quite rational: Each time, he didn't look forward to it; and each time, they let him through without a hitch.

He was bound back for Montreal, not unlike how he arrived there in the first place, albeit this time with more organization. He planned to head south, see California, go to Chicago, and then to NYC. Owen had decided before coming out to BC to defer his MA's start date until January. He needed this time to settle accounts with Lily, who released money owing to him from an inheritance – not much, for sure, but enough to travel on the cheap for a month or two. He also needed this travel to get some things straight in his head.

The house, once his grandmother's, was now firmly his. Lily remained its steward and was to pay for upkeep and property taxes. Should he decide to sell, he'd tell her well in advance and guarantee some of the sale money to help her pay for a condo or wherever she felt she had to go. Things were legally more agreeable: no Uncle John, less legal babble, less arguing.

He took time to visit Robbie Simpson's grave. Owen thought it curious how he and Robbie had come from two different crowds but somehow clicked and hung out on occasion. Owen was sad about Robbie no longer being around. He felt out of sorts that Robbie had gotten someone pregnant and then skedaddled. Then again, on that account, Owen was in no position to criticize.

Being at his grad reunion had made him think about his life. Aidan's advice about not keeping Carina on his brain to any degree finally sunk in. Owen figured on not settling down just yet, but he acknowledged one takeaway from his last relationship: He was going to be serious.

"Next time, it'll be without losing my head. Balance: That's the ticket."

He also decided that flakes were definitely out, as were players, unless it was mutual. His days of being Alfie-junior were quite done. He detested what Seanna had said to him, but he knew she was right. He wanted to avoid such wake-up calls in the future.

Yesterday, a letter from Lyne had arrived, telling Owen that Will had succumbed and that she'd deferred her graduate studies until January. She was to going to be the first person he wanted to visit upon return.

He thought about getting back together with Lyne but then dashed that. He knew he'd most likely be invited to her parents' for Christmas this year, that she'd want someone like Owen around her, and that this wouldn't trouble him at all, though he did get the strange feeling he'd be elsewhere for Christmas.

He began to wonder why it even crossed his mind to revisit what he and Lyne had had. He thought about others within his nebula, but it seemed rather limiting. He'd already gone out with Lyne, Alexa, and Carina, slept with Dannie, and avoided types like Debbie and Allana. Yet, he couldn't conceive being interested in anyone outside any group he'd been a part of. He put this on pause, avoiding over-planning. One day he'd see who else there was.

He'd felt the outsider at his grad reunion, but it was good to see people again. It was also good to be on straightforward terms with Lily. He felt that his grandmother's house – he couldn't bring himself to call it "his" – was in good hands. He'd have a place to go to, if he chose, in the future. He figured on getting grad school done before deciding what to do with her house. For now, his life in Montreal awaited him.

The train pulled out of the station, trundled across the Flats then through the Cut, and zipped east then south, slowing past New Westminster, where the international trains used to stop.

It was there that she restarted reading a book given to her and the single seat facing hers became occupied. She never understood why anyone wanted to sit like that. To her, it made sense that people wanted to see where they were going, not where they'd been.

"Hi", she said.

"Hi", he said. "They assigned me the wrong seat, apparently."

"Oh", she said, letting out a little laugh.

"Dorothy Parker?"

"Sorry? No, I'm..."

"The book. The one you're holding?"

"Oh, yeah", she laughed a little.

"I did an essay on her once", he said. "She's one of my favourites."

She looked at the eyes of this stranger. She thought of Mrs. Thomas' words: a rover not far away from settling down. She looked at him curiously, then smiled. "Did you study literature?"

"Yup! Concordia, Class of 1996."

She had a glimmer of recognition. "Hey, didn't I see you at my grad reunion?"

"Well, I was at a grad reunion recently. A few weeks ago. Hatzquiam High?"

"That's the one. You won a bottle of wine."

"For living the farthest away from Hatzquiam High. Yup, same reunion."

She realized again how that would've been her winning that bottle of wine if only the grad reunion had been held a year earlier when she lived abroad.

"Then again", she thought, "I probably wouldn't have been able to make it in the first place."

She still wasn't 100% sure about this guy. She thought about it a little more: She didn't quite buy his story about being assigned the wrong seat.

"So, where are you headed?" she asked him.

"Eventually? Montreal, where I live. Gotta be back there before Hallowe'en. Otherwise, I'll turn into a pumpkin."

She laughed.

"I'll stop at New York City along the way to meet up with a friend", he continued. "Otherwise, drifting south then east more-or-less. And you?"

"Just drifting."

He smiled at her.

"This friend of yours in New York: Someone special?" she asked.

"Yeh, she's special all right; special to everyone. A real square peg, that one. Kinda like each person I know."

She smiled again. "Interesting. I've never been to the East Coast before."

"It's..." He bunched his lips together and shrugged a bit. "...different from here."

"To every city its charms?"

"Pretty much", he said, smiling.

Meanwhile, as the train slowly passed through Bayline, on the beach, standing on a partially buried rock was Tad, and not too far away from the tracks. He didn't know which car Michelle was in, so he started waving as the train approached and didn't stop til it had passed.

Back inside the train, she saw Tad and waved back. The man across from her smiled and pointed at Tad and then waved back. She looked at him with a smile and some curiosity before deciding to accept his story about seats.

"So, did you ever drink that bottle of wine?" asked Michelle.

"It's back at my aunt's house in Glenridge. She doesn't drink, so I've no fear of it disappearing."

"Glenridge? That's up the hill from my parents' place. And you know Tad, too?"

"Who doesn't?" Owen asked, smiling.

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Boomerangs and Square Pegs

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K.H. McMurray

BOOKS, STORIES, OPINIONS



K.H. McMurray is a writer, Montreal-based since 1987. He is the writer and publisher of the chapbook “A Visit”. This is his first novel.

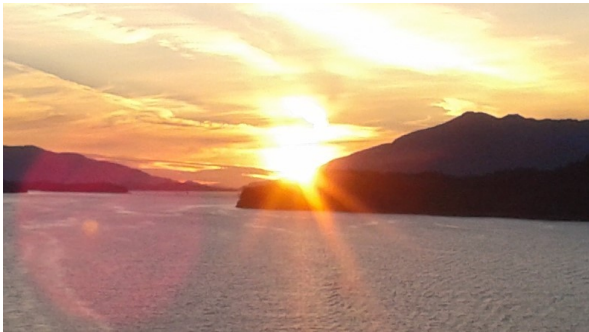
Photo by Marijo Bourgault

Happy-go-lucky Michelle has a terrible secret but can't decide what's worse: Keeping it bottled up inside, or telling her family.

Aidan comes home after having studied abroad for six years. Many things he likes are changing for the worst or disappearing. Too many things he doesn't care for are popping up like weeds.

Owen has lived a care-free love life. One day, he falls for someone hard and it shocks him awake.

At a grad reunion, people wonder how they'll appear in the eyes of others and how they'll see others. Has anything really changed?



Front cover photo taken from the stern of a cruise ship in the Alaska Panhandle, at 10:20pm, by K.H. McMurray.

